

## Chapter Two

### AUTHORITY, WISDOM, AND GRACE. ESPECIALLY GRACE

A CARPENTER told me once that, in theory at least, he could build a house with three tools: a hammer, a saw, and a T-square. God has equipped us pastors in many wonderful ways, beginning with the message of the cross. But these three tools seem most indispensable for our work: authority, wisdom, and grace. And the greatest of these is grace.

### AUTHORITY

I hadn't been a pastor more than a few weeks when I first felt the weight of pastoral authority. A woman probably fifteen years my senior had been harshly critical of another person. I had an unexpected divine appointment with her in the foyer, with no one else around, and I knew I needed to confront her. I don't remember the words I used anymore, but I know I approached her as a pastor. To my amazement, she listened to me. She slumped and said I was right and that she was sorry. I walked away sobered by the experience. I knew I had just had my first direct experience of pastoral authority. It felt weighty, too big for me.

God *authorizes* pastors. You usually hear the texts at pastoral installation and ordination services. "I *charge* you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality" (1 Timothy 5:21). "I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:1-2). "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care" (1 Peter 5:2). Charges like those change us.

In 2 Kings 2, just before Elijah was taken up in the chariot of fire, his protegee Elisha asked for a double portion of his spirit. The Bible says when Elijah was gone, Elisha tore his clothes. Then he picked up the cloak that Elijah left behind—the King James Version called it the mantle—and struck the water of the Jordan River with it. It was time to find out whether or not Elijah's spirit had been passed on to him. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he cried, and the water parted. I assume that, with his old garments

shredded, Elisha always wore Elijah's cloak after that. It is like that when God endows pastors with spiritual authority.

It may come as a surprise, but God doesn't give pastors authority primarily so we can muscle through a new philosophy of worship or whip the missions committee into shape. We do have a certain authority to get things done around church, but I call that Authority the Lesser. It is conferred by our job description when we're hired. Authority the Greater is the mantle-the cloak—that God lays across our shoulders to empower our Wordwork.

I like authority as much as the next guy, but this *pastoral* authority is different. Let me count some ways.

### *Don't Speak for Yourself*

Pastoral authority requires us always and only to serve our Master's wishes and words. We have a lot in common with the presidential press secretaries. They are expected to stand in front of an audience and speak for the president. They are to say what the president wants said and to explain as the president himself would. But press secretaries get in deep trouble if they say what the president never intended, if they try to make *their* words *his* words. So it is for pastors opening the Bible in sermons, Bible studies, or counseling. Do you ever get so used to speaking for the Lord that you think your own opinions are divinely inspired? There's a fine line there, but it is a dangerous thing to flash the badge of divine authority for personal use.

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WE ARE ALSO SPIRITUAL FIRST RESPONDERS.

Pastoral authority requires that we are straightforward with God's Word. Not unkind, or tactless, or unnecessarily blunt, but we must be direct. Someone praised me once for being bold in the pulpit. I felt sheepish. I don't usually find it difficult to be direct when I'm preaching. I don't consider it a virtue. What *is* hard is confronting someone personally. "Brother, I need to tell you something difficult: This ministry is not the right place for you. I'm going to have to ask you to step away from it." Or, "Friend, do you know how hurtful those words were? This has to stop." I have two suggestions, two spoonfuls of sugar to help the medicine go down. First, don't confront someone

till you've gathered up love for them. It can take awhile, but if you don't consciously love the person you face, your words will inflict blunt force trauma. Secondly, smile whenever you can. Come kindly. A sympathetic smile says you aren't there to hurt them.

### *Step into the Mess*

Pastoral authority is not all about laying down the law. When I think of a policeman's authority, I think first of his right to enforce the law—to break up parties, give official warnings, or arrest people. But his authority also means that he walks into trouble when the rest of us are heading for the exits. I don't suppose cops relish that risk, but it goes with the badge. Pastoral authority is like that. We don't just tell people what God wants them to do. We are also spiritual first responders. As one of my students put it, "We step into the mess."

No one was in the office but me when Monica called. She was frantic because she couldn't reach her teenage son Luke, who was supposed to be home. He had been deeply despondent when she left that morning, and now he wasn't picking up his phone. She worked too far away to get there quickly and begged me to go to their place. "Can you please go over there? The back door is open," she said. She was afraid he had committed suicide.

I arrived about twenty minutes later and went around to the back. I was frightened at what I was about to find. "Luke," I called. "Luke, are you here?" I could hear the TV, but he wasn't in the living room and I turned it off. Dead quiet. "Luke. It's Pastor Lee. Your mom asked me to come to see if you're all right. Are you here?" Nothing. I looked up the staircase where I could see into the bathroom. There he was, sitting on the floor, head between his knees, perfectly still. I caught my breath. "Luke!" I got to the top of the steps and then he looked up at me.

"What's happening, man? Your mom is really worried about you. I'm going to call her." While we waited he told me about the girlfriend who left him and his frustrations with trying to get his high school equivalency diploma. Typical teenage angst; but for a boy with no father to give him emotional ballast, it was devastating. I listened and sympathized. I got in his face a little. I hugged him and prayed for him. In the days after, I called and texted. Our youth pastor called, too, but Luke never responded.

Sometimes when pastors step into a mess we pick up the wounds of others. Our eyes get a little sadder.

### *Paths of Righteousness*

Pastoral authority requires that we lead God's flock on paths of righteousness. There are a lot of books and seminars for pastors about leadership. I've read some and they helped. We need to know how to lead a church toward the vision God has given us. We need to know how to lead through the upsets of change. Pastors identify with Joshua and Nehemiah, leading people to claim God's blessings and to build a holy city. Beyond that, shepherds lead people on solitary paths of illness, or painful waiting, and even through the valley of the shadow of death.

In all these pilgrimages, the pastor's task is not merely to get people from point A to point B. The Good Shepherd teaches us that we must guide them all the way "in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." I've learned to tell those who do not know which way to turn, "Today, if nothing else is clear, do not sin. Some kind of sin will seem like a relief or escape, but don't sin. It will only make things worse." I've learned, too, from watching heroic saints, to say, "God may not make this trial go away and He may not tell you why. But those who have been through the fire tell us to cling to the Lord, no matter what. He is faithful."

### *Authority without the Usual Perks*

The authority God invests in pastors does not come with the usual perks of leadership. You don't really get to be the boss of anything. (That's the part that seems to get lost in some Christian leadership books.) People will ignore you just as they ignore God; yet *still* we're expected to lead them. Jesus tells us explicitly that we cannot lord it over others, but rather we must be their servants. *Foot washing* servants! It is a hard way to get things done. Plus sometimes God Himself practically kills us "so that [Jesus'] life may be revealed in our mortal bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:11).

WISDOM SITS DOWN NEXT TO US AS WE LISTEN TO A  
PARISHIONER. WISDOM LISTENS WITH QUESTIONS.

All in all, though, pastoral authority is a great gift to us and to God's flock. Scripture needs no help, of course. Yet God puts His Word in a pastor's heart and hands and something wonderful happens for the ill or hungry, the agitated or stubborn who listen and see. The shepherd's God-given authority amplifies what God has said. When good shepherds spread a table before the flock of God, it

is God's Word on the plates, and our enemies can only watch from the shadows.

## WISDOM

Wisdom, says Proverbs, is like an eloquent and elegant woman, a diligent and creative helpmate. Wisdom is lovely, gowned in grace.

The first thing wisdom will tell us, no matter what we're facing, is to fear the Lord. Even the most dismal problem is God's throne room. Then she always points us straight to the cross of Christ and His empty tomb. She tells us that every solution or insight runs through the wisdom and power of Christ.

### *Wisdom Listens*

Speaking wisely is not usually the same as giving advice. Most of us are sorely tempted to quick fixes, the pastoral version of "take two aspirin and call me in the morning." Wisdom, on the other hand, doesn't have the blurts. Wisdom sits down next to us as we listen to a parishioner. Wisdom listens with us until the part of the story hiding behind the door comes out, until the person before us knows they are loved, until the person's soul finally gets a word in edgewise. Wisdom listens with questions.

While we're listening, whether to someone we're counseling, a board discussion, or our small group's prayer requests, we're also listening for the Holy Spirit to speak. I imagine having one of those discreet earbuds, like the Secret Service wears. We're attentive to what's happening around us, but we're also listening intently to the murmured guidance of God in our inner ear. If we wait and don't talk so much, He will speak. If He doesn't, say to the person across from you, "I don't know what God wants us to think about this. Let's pray and ask Him." After that, wait. For a week, if you have to.

It isn't often that I feel God tell me directly what to say next, but when I listen for Him and trust Him to speak, interesting questions form in my mind and elusive connections come together. I begin to see the issue beneath the issue. Sometimes in those moments I see how Scripture reframes what I'm hearing. A story may come to mind or the name of someone in the church who would be a good helper. Sometimes wisdom just sympathizes.

OUR JOB IS TO HELP PEOPLE REFRAME THEIR GRIEF  
THROUGH THE COUNTERINTUITIVE WORD OF GOD.

Once in the pastor's group I treasure, one of the brothers told us how heavyhearted he was over a mother-daughter duo who was constantly coming to him for money and help. It had started with one of those phone calls looking for a handout and never stopped. They never came to church or showed any interest in the Lord. But the thing was, he cared about them and had helped them again and again. He asked us to pray for him, because he felt so sad about the many needy people who called or came to the church door.

We jumped to his aid. "You can't let these people get to you," said one of us. Another informed him, "In our church we have a policy that these calls all go to one of the elders. I don't ever get involved." I said, "I think I know those two. We gave them some money. I can't believe they're still making the rounds."

Then it hit me. "You're not asking us for our advice, are you?" I said in embarrassment. He shook his head. Humbled, we prayed for his heavy heart, as he had asked. In those moments, I realized that by loving those difficult people, people the rest of us preferred to ignore, our friend was sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Here we were trying to make his troubles go away, when Jesus wanted to meet him there. We hadn't been wise. We've all listened more carefully since then.

### *Wisdom Reframes the Picture*

I saw a trade magazine once for framing stores. There were photographs of the winning entries from a contest the magazine had sponsored. Each framer got the same print but none of the entries looked remotely alike. It is astonishing how the size and color of a mat and frame change a picture. It *even feels* different. Pastoral wisdom is often a matter of reframing the picture people bring to us.

Scripture is always counterintuitive. Left to ourselves, we never would have thought of anything the Bible teaches. Who would have imagined, for example, that suffering—a "thorn in the flesh"—does not just build character but is actually where God stages His strength? Or what about Habakkuk, the prophet of God, who never dreamed that God would use the wicked to chasten his beloved people. When people come to us for help, or when our church is in turmoil, our job is to help them reframe the picture through the counterintuitive Word of God. "You see it this way," we say, "but look at this situation from God's perspective." We usually don't do God's people any favors when we just give them advice. Wisdom lies in helping them see their picture with God's frame around it.

## GRACE, WITHOUT JESUS CHRIST, IS HOMELESS.

We're only able to reframe wisely if our own personal work in the Word does not go stale. The Bible has to be percolating already in my heart when someone comes to talk. We've all learned the uncanny way God briefs us in advance from Scripture for problems we never saw coming. Students in the counseling class I teach sometimes think they should make a catalog of Bible verses for every specific counseling situation so they'll be ready no matter what problem they hear. There are books that do that. But I find that if Scripture is fresh on my mind, no matter where I have been reading and studying, it comes to life in my counseling and leading. In many cases it isn't so much the biblical principle I need as the reframing of the picture only the Bible can accomplish.

*Wisdom Is God's Gift to Pastors*

Surely we have prayed like young Solomon for wisdom to lead God's people. I've noticed how often the wisdom of Scripture lies dormant within me until it blooms in a counseling session or conversation. The unique gift of wisdom is that we get to keep everything we learn. The more wisdom we dispense, the more wisdom we have. Plus, we are the repositories of the whole congregation's stories. We're the church's wisdom bankers.

It is the pastor's lot to hear and weigh life's most confounding problems. People want so badly to find someone wise. Not just glib advice givers, but someone deeply insightful, a shepherd who understands souls and can discern the heart's low frequencies and the overtones of God's grace.

## GRACE. ESPECIALLY GRACE

Bill Moyers hosted a TV documentary on the hymn "Amazing Grace." For more than an hour I watched the story of John Newton's life and how he wrote this most famous hymn. Musicians of every stripe talked about its power. Alcoholics and convicts told how they leaned on it. But as far as I remember, in all that program the name of Jesus Christ was only mentioned once—when the epitaph on John Newton's gravestone was read.

Grace, without Jesus Christ, is homeless. To be clear, grace doesn't save a wretch like me. Jesus Christ does. It is the pastor's highest privilege to be an agent of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God's grace in Christ is our calling, our work, our stock-in-trade.

Paul told Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist.” We do that in our preaching and in our relationships. Pastors have the high privilege of leading people to trust Christ, and there is no work of grace more amazing than that. Some pastors *only* do the work of an evangelist, and perhaps that is their calling from God. But it is not the way a church is nourished. Years ago I sat for a year under a pastor whose every sermon was evangelistic. I don’t know if anyone came to Christ through those sermons, but I don’t think the church was very strong. Grace had become a monotone.

The greatest accomplishment of God’s grace in Christ is to forgive and revive helpless and hopeless sinners. But grace does more than that. Pastors should dispense grace every chance we get. That is what this book is about. First, let’s get oriented.

### *Grace Inbound*

Before we can dispense grace, we must receive it. To begin with, of course, we must be born again. But after that, we pastors are often rather resistant to grace. The fact is, grace is really hard to take. By nature I’m like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son, dutiful and disciplined. I *am* an elder brother. But unlike that self-righteous sibling in the story, I do not bridle when I hear of the Father’s grace running to meet the wayward. I’m glad for that. I don’t think God should be tougher on other sinners. My problem is that I think the Father should be much tougher on me. I’ve always been the straight arrow. I keep most of the rules. Once I asked my teenage son how he’d describe me to his friends. “Over-achiever,” he said. “Much given, much expected,” is my assumption. That doesn’t leave much room for grace.

It certainly isn’t that I don’t want God’s grace. I do. But I just can’t get past the fact that I don’t deserve it. I want to be deserving. That’s why I say grace is hard to take.

### MEET PEOPLE WITH YOUR POCKETS BULGING WITH GRACE.

Pastors should not sin so that grace might abound, of course; but we cannot shepherd the flock of God if we can’t take grace ourselves. I sing benedictions in church sometimes (more about that later). One Sunday, after a whole service focused on the message of the cross, I sang the line, “Be strengthened by grace ...” and my voice caught. Tears came. I suppose, if people noticed, they thought it was



for their sakes, but I really wept for myself. After the week I'd had, I needed God's grace.

Grace is just as hard for the rest of God's people to take, so we need to keep at it. We're all like Peter, deeply uncomfortable with Christ washing our feet. That's why every sermon should be marinated in the grace of Christ. Sermons and counseling sessions that hammer have their place, but they're dangerous in heavy doses. God's people start taking on the prodigal's speech, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (Luke 15:19). We're not worthy, of course, but God never leaves us there. Pastors must not either.

### *Pockets Full of Grace*

Jim was a gangly, grinning, retired blue-collar worker with the goofiest sense of humor I ever encountered. He had come to Christ in his sixties and, oh how he loved Jesus. His official ministry was usher, and he was born to do it. What especially endeared Jim to the church was that every Sunday, when the service was over, he would be waiting by the rear doors for the children. His jacket pockets bulged with Smarties, little rolls of candy, and every child got one. He loved the children so much that when he gave out that candy it could break your heart to watch. And we all watched.

Grace isn't candy, I know, but that is a wonderful picture for pastors. Grace isn't always about sin. Grace is God's favor lavished on those who couldn't get their hands on it by themselves. Meet people with your pockets bulging with grace.

*Keep the grace of Scripture in your pockets.* Don't be glib with it; don't turn God's words into platitudes. But as Proverbs 25:11 says, "A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." Use Scripture to encourage and bless. Give out Bible words like small compasses to disoriented people, like water for runners, like God's smile for the sad.

*Have a pocketful of the grace of sympathy and understanding* "That must have felt awful," you say. Or, "Thank you for being so faithful." "I would have been so scared. Were you?" "I've noticed in this trial how you have tried to trust the Lord."

We hand out grace, too, when we remember a visitor's name, the anniversary of a loved one's death, when we celebrate a good grade on an exam, or cheer for a wedding anniversary.

Always carry grace in your pockets. Be lavish with it, extravagant. There's plenty more where that came from.

When I was a young pastor, I heard someone say that a church takes on the personality of its pastor within three years. I don't know if that's true, but I do know that a pastor whose pockets are full of grace is likely to see his flock spread grace. God's grace is contagious. Being around grace is like being near someone who can't stop laughing. Pretty soon, you're laughing too.

**"IN THIS TOWN THERE IS A MAN OF GOD"**

I was ordained on Sunday afternoon, December 27, 1981. My uncle, Dr. David Larsen, delivered the challenge. His text for me was 1 Samuel 9:6: "But the servant replied, 'Look, in this town there is a man of God; he is highly respected, and everything he says comes true. Let's go there now. Perhaps he will tell us what way to take.'" The mantle of that text was laid across my shoulders. Doing Wordwork for the Lord requires I have a good reputation and welcome people who long to know what way to take.

When we begin this daunting ministry, God gives us these three indispensable tools: authority, wisdom, and grace. But the greatest of these is grace. Grace, above all, is the pastor's foot in the door, the credential on our windshield that lets us park close to people's hearts.