

The Minister and His Use of Information

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Introduction

Ten years ago, and perhaps even five years ago, this lecture would probably have been titled, “The Minister and His Library.” However, because the word *library* has the connotation of an owned, physically fixed collection of primarily print materials, this designation may no longer be valid. In today’s economy, information is found in many different media—print, magnetic, optical, broadcast—and ownership is not nearly as important as access. So this lecture is entitled, “The Minister and His Use of Information.”

Like it or not, ministers are considered to be information sources by their communities. According to Thomas Tanner, a 1990 Gallup poll revealed that 70% of American adults believed ministers were “important sources of information and advice in the community,” surpassing even “lawyers (60%), bankers (55%), and librarians (40%)” (1). Tanner goes on to develop a view of the minister as an information professional—a gatherer and disseminator of information.

Functional Roles of the Minister

Most ministers engage in a variety of activities which can probably be classed in one of five functional roles: preaching, teaching, evangelism, pastoral care, and administration. Each of the major roles of the minister requires him to make effective use of information.

Preaching and teaching involve the use of numerous exegetical tools, including commentaries, lexicons, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and theologies. The preacher or teacher is also concerned with the shape of the sermon or lesson, and thus may frequent illustration books, works about sermon preparation and delivery, and other sources.

Evangelism may not seem to require significant informational input. However, if the preacher is to communicate the gospel to the unsaved he must understand the secular mind-set that hinders them from coming to Christ. Given that this cultural framework changes over time, the minister is best advised to stay informed concerning current events and popular culture.

Pastoral care likewise necessitates accurate and timely information. While many pastoral care functions may be carried out without research, others demand it. Reference to books and other documents would be helpful in preparation for crisis counseling (e.g., in cases of suicide, domestic violence), difficult funerals (e.g., infants, criminals), and in a host of other situations.

Administration involves the managerial oversight of church life, including legal and business decision-making. Such activity should not be divorced from the assimilation of good information. The wise pastor will seek out appropriate information sources to support his church administration.

The Preacher as Scholar

The above considerations suggest that the preacher is to be a scholar of sorts—a person whose job depends on finding, processing, and communicating volumes of information. Numerous authors have written concerning the importance of maintaining an active intellectual life in ministry.

Margaret and Bartlett Hess observe:

Whether you're a preacher, or a minister whose primary job is teaching, visiting, directing youth or Christian education, you need to have learned something new this week. . . . You have to develop a lifestyle that stimulates growth. (31)

James M. Boice echoes this notion:

[T]he work of preparation should continue in some form throughout the ministry. The ministry should not only be an educated ministry. It should be educable and self-educating. If it is, the preacher will continue to be fresh, alive, and interesting. If it is not, his material will soon run out and the sermons will become repetitious and boring. (95)

Elgin Moyer corroborates:

Since the chief task of the minister is to study and administer the Word of God and to care for his parish, here and there a pastor may seriously question the expediency of giving much of his valuable time to reading. Should he not forego this pleasure, or sacrifice this luxury for the sake of his people? No; for the sake of his people as well as for himself he must read. The service he can render his people, the consolation he can give them, and the spiritual uplift he can be to them are some good reasons why he must read intelligently and widely. (15)

The Dilemma of Information Overload

Some may be led to conclude that the more information that a preacher is exposed to, the more prepared he will be for ministry. Such is not necessarily the case, however. Some secular social scientists have come to the realization that there is a difference between information and meaning (Klapp). While the amount of information available to the inhabitants of developed countries is multiplying exponentially, the human mind is limited in its ability to evaluate the meaning of all the data. Christians have a unique insight into this situation, recognizing that mere access to facts does not translate into the acquisition of wisdom.

It is impossible for a preacher (or anyone else, for that matter) to pay attention to every source of information to which he has reasonable access. To attempt to do so results in information overload, producing feelings of stress and frustration. Consequently, ministers must make deliberate efforts to select the materials they read. They must be concerned about the quality of their reading rather than its quantity. In the business of preparation for ministry, less is often more.

Works Cited

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