

# People Skills

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One sometimes hears that the most important job skill for a pastor to have is "people skills." This opinion rates "people skills" too highly since the most important aptitude for a pastor to have is a clear, correct, and thorough knowledge of Scripture. The treasure of the gospel is more important than the attractiveness of the clay jar that holds it. In theology, content is more critical than the means and manner of delivery. Nevertheless, we would agree that the "people skills" of a pastor are very important. The curriculum of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is divided 50-50 between acquiring content and obtaining practical skills in delivering that content.

The most important people skills for a pastor to possess are competence in preaching, teaching, and counseling. Much of practical value can be learned from studying and practicing various theories about how to preach, teach, and counsel effectively, but the most important people skills needed for all three of these disciplines come through exegesis—the careful study of Scripture. Much insight into humanity can be gained through studying the self-expression of a culture in its literature and art, but the best window into the human heart and mind is Scripture.

The most important people skill that a pastor needs is knowledge of himself as sinner and saint. Looking at himself daily in the mirror of the law will prevent pride or self-righteousness that might make him impatient with the sins and weaknesses of others. Awareness of the old nature that still lurks within will warn him to build strong walls against the sins that are always trying to barge into his life in order to ruin his ministry. When he rejoices that he himself is a saint in Christ in spite of the evil that still lurks within his heart, he will beware of judging the saints in his congregation by the all too sinful outward appearance they sometimes display. With Paul he will say, "From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Co 5:16,17). Recognizing that his members are sinner/saints just as he himself is, he will not give up on people too easily nor become too quickly disheartened by their failures.

When he finds comfort in Christ for his own afflictions and sufferings, he will be able to comfort others. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows" (2 Co 1:3-5).

The pastor's preaching will not rely on rhetorical tricks or persuasive words but on the power of the gospel. "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Co 2:2-5). His preaching is not shaped by a desire to curry favor or to win reward but by sincere love for the lost and straying. "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (2 Co 2:17). (Though the sincerity of words is not necessarily dependent on eloquence and style, hearers are most likely to feel the sincerity if the sermon is preached freely, not read.)

A shepherd needs a tender, compassionate heart to keep pursuing the one lost sheep until he finds it (Lk 15). He follows the Lord's example of patience with his disciples. He does not "break the bruised reed" or "snuff out the smoldering wick" (Mt 12:20).

The pastor needs a hard heart to stand up to the hard-hearted and the defiant. He must be more unyielding than they are so that he is more persistent in proclaiming the truth to them than they are in denying it (Ezk 3:7-9). In the words of the Savior he cannot be "a reed blown by the wind," a people pleaser who will tell the crowd whatever they want to hear (Mt 11:7).

Whether he is bringing the bad news of the law or the good news of the gospel, he will speak the truth in love to friend and to foe. Though he contends for the truth, he is not contentious, because he remembers that his

primary goal is not to win arguments but to win people. He has been taught, "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil" (2 Ti 2:23-26).

Pastoral skills are essentially the same as family skills, the same skills the pastor needs as a father, son, and a brother. He is gentle as a mother caring for her children. He encourages, comforts, and urges as a father does with his own children (1 Th 2:7,11,12). He treats older men as he would his father, older women as his mother, younger men as brothers, and younger women as sisters (1 Ti 5:1).

The pastor recognizes that he is the leader of a team, a team in which each member has a role to play. In addition to training the other members of the team, he gives them both the positive and negative feedback that will help them improve, with an emphasis on the positive. Like Paul he will be generous with praise, commendation, and thanks. "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart" (Php 1:3-7).

The pastor understands that he cannot add power to the gospel but he strives in every way to "make the teaching about God our Savior attractive" by showing that he can be fully trusted (Tit 2:10).

There are many valuable courses, seminars, and books that a pastor can turn to in order to improve his people skills of the second rank (those concerned with externals and methodology), but the best tool, in one sense, the only tool, to improve his people skills of the highest rank (those that flow from a sanctified heart) is his daily study of the Bible. There he will find the models (Jesus, Paul and the other apostles, Jeremiah and the prophets, David, and Nathan, to name a few) and the motivation to be a people person of the kind only God can create. The pastor's competence to work with people flows from the gospel and the new life it generates. "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant-not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Co 3:4-6). It is the competence that flows from the Spirit that will make the pastor a shepherd after God's own heart.