Of Nails and Donkeys

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Evangelist Glenn Coon begins his book *The ABC’s of Bible Prayer* with words written by Mildred Hill:

Lord, make me a nail upon the wall, fastened securely in its place. Then from this thing so common and so small hang a bright picture of Thy face that travelers may pause to look upon the loveliness depicted there, and passing on their weary ways, each radiant face may bear stamped so that nothing can efface—the image of Thy glory and Thy grace. Lord, let not one soul think of me. Only let me be a nail upon the wall, holding Thy picture in its place.¹

The message is so beautiful. Yet a real temptation in ministry would be to make Jesus a nail on the wall holding up a picture of us, the ministers.

**Barth’s dilemma**

On his eightieth birthday, theologian Karl Barth fidgeted in his seat as he listened to one person after another lavish praise on him for all of his glorious achievements. Their words caused in Barth a dual sensation: one of gratitude, the other of alarm. He had experienced the same sensation over the last few weeks as his name appeared in newspapers around the world. On the eve of this birthday, he was being hailed as the greatest theologian of the twentieth century and was being compared to the church fathers.²

When he finally spoke at the celebration, he shared the reason for his alarm. He had brought with him his personal copy of his 1922 *Epistles to the Romans*. Inside the flyleaf was an inscription he had made to himself.

> “From Karl Barth to his dear friend Karl Barth.”³ What followed were some sentences that Barth had taken from volume 63 of the Erlangen edition of *Martin Luther’s Works*:

If you think and are of the opinion that you really stand secure and you please yourself with your own books, your teaching, and writings, [if you think] that you have very splendidly and have preached magnificently, and if it then pleases you to be praised before others, yes, if you perhaps want to be praised lest you mourn and give up, then, my friend, if you are man enough, put your hands on your ears, and if you do so rightly, you will find a lovely pair of big, long, rough donkey’s ears. Do not spare the cost of decorating them with golden bells so that you can be heard wherever you go and the people can point to you and say: Behold, behold! There goes the splendid creature that writes such wonderful books and preaches such wonderful sermons.⁴

**Donkey ears**

Reflecting upon this portion of Barth’s speech, Brian Williams points out that Luther and Barth both knew of the inherent temptation in pastoral ministry to draw others to ourselves as ministers.⁵ To use Jesus as a nail to hang a picture of us, or, as Luther phrases it, to decorate our donkey ears with bells so that people will notice us when we go by, is one of our greatest pitfalls.⁶

This temptation arises in pastors’ meetings, for instance, when we begin to share all the baptisms we have performed. Putting the numbers out there feeds our sinful desire to compete with each other and our human compulsion to say, “Look at me!”

God has not called us to compete with other churches or other pastors. God has called us to be faithful and fruitful where He has placed us. You are not serving where you are by accident or happenstance; God has placed you there. Whether you are in a multichurch district or a single, large congregation, your role is the same: reveal Jesus to others.

Too often, we minister for our own self-glory, not for the glory of Christ and the redemption of those whom He has entrusted to us. Our hunger for self-glorification causes us, as Paul Tripp so aptly states, to be “more position oriented than submission oriented.”⁷

The desire for self-glorification often causes us to envy the promotion and position of others. We view ourselves as being more worthy than they of the larger church or the conference position, and we become angry that they got what we believe should have been ours. In our envy and jealousy, we may even begin to question the fairness and justice
of God. Such envy often leads to bitterness. We lose our motivation for doing what is right because we are more interested in position than submission.

Position orientation will cause you to be political when you should be pastoral. It will cause you to require service when you should be willing to serve. It will cause you to demand of others what you wouldn’t be willing to do yourself. It will cause you to ask for privilege when you should be willing to give up your rights. It will cause you to think too much about how things will affect you, rather than thinking of how things will reflect on Christ. It will cause you to want to set the agenda, rather than finding joy in submitting to the agenda of Another.9

Celebrity status

Preaching can also feed into self-glorification. “Public speaking presents continual opportunity to perform, or . . . ‘show off!’ Listen to me, see what I know, watch as I impress you with my Greek” and Hebrew, or my powerful delivery.9 Richard Baxter probes this point of preaching pride:

And when pride hath made the sermon, it goes with us into the pulpit, it formeth our tone, it animateth us in the delivery, it takes us off from that which may be displeasing how necessary soever, and setteth us in pursuit of vain applause. In short, the sum of all is this, it maketh men [and women], both in studying and preaching, to seek themselves, and deny God, when they should seek God’s glory, and deny themselves. When they should inquire, what shall I say, and how shall I say it, to please God best, and do most good? It makes them ask, what shall I say, and how shall I deliver it, to be thought a learned and able preacher, and to be applauded by all who hear me? When the sermon is done, pride goeth home with them, and maketh them more eager to know whether they were applauded, than whether they did prevail for the saving of souls. Were it not for shame, they could find in their hearts to ask people how they liked them, and to draw out their commendations. If they perceive that they are highly thought of, they rejoice, as having attained their end; but if they see that they are considered but weak or common men [or women], they are displeased, having missed the price they had in view.10

Up-front ministry offers us “a ridiculously low-level celebrity status” that can become addicting.11 We stand at the door at the end of the sermon, and with our big ears we await the praise and adulation we imagine will be ours as people pass by.

The desire of self-adulation can also manifest itself in pulpit hoarding. You are afraid to let your associate pastor, local elder, or church member speak because they might be as good as or even better than you are. Instead of utilizing their gifts for God’s glory, you are afraid they may eclipse you.

However, it is not only in the area of pulpit ministry that the desire to increase ourselves causes us to discount or diminish the gifts of others. At times, pastors refuse to delegate ministry because their pride does not allow them to see the spiritual giftedness in others. Humility is required to seek out, affirm, and utilize the gifts of others and embrace ministry, not as a one-person show but as a community process.

The temptation is real and seductive to hook an earring, bell, or maybe some ribbon on our big donkey ears, and then to trot around with our newly adorned ears for others to see and applaud. We become so caught up in our parade that we forget that the parade was never for us in the first place. It was only for Christ and the crowd to see Him.12

Barth again

Near the end of his speech at his birthday celebration, Barth compared his life and ministry to that of another donkey and offered that donkey as a metaphor of ministry:

A real donkey was mentioned in the Bible. . . . It was permitted to carry Jesus to Jerusalem. If I have done anything in this life of mine, I have done it as a relative of that donkey that went its way carrying an important burden. The disciples had said to the owner: “The Lord hath need of it.” And so it seems to have pleased God to use me at this time, just as I was, in spite of all the things, the disagreeable things, that quite rightly are and will be said about me. Thus I was used . . . I was permitted to be the donkey that carried.13

When will it be good enough to just carry the Messiah through the streets so that He, and not we, might be seen? May you and I come to the place in ministry where our greatest desire is to be a nail upon which hangs a picture of Christ or a donkey that simply carries Jesus through the streets.14

3 Ibid., 113.
4 Ibid.
5 Brian Williams, The Potter’s Rib: Mentoring for Pastoral Formation (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 169.
6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
11 Mead, “Preaching and Pride.”
12 Williams, The Potter’s Rib, 169.
13 Barth, Fragments Grave and Gray, 116, 117.