

PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES WITH PRAGMATISM

A. THE CHALLENGE

At first, the challenge seemed straight-forward: consider the impact of pragmatism on the church. Of all concepts that are technical philosophical schools, pragmatism must be the most popular, having entered the common language and having its own neat slogans like “the end justifies the means” and “Truth is what works”. But the more I thought about this, the more cloudy things became: the term seems to be rather elastic, sometimes used simply as a synonym for being practical, a man of action; other times a rather formless critique, one of those epithets to be slung at an opponent that clinches the argument – “He’s just a pragmatist” – without the bother of actually explaining why.

The problem is that if I declare myself to be in opposition to pragmatism, will I then confirm the views expressed by some that I am in little touch with daily life? Useful, perhaps, if a question arises on the meaning of some obscure text, but if actual *work* is involved, especially if it needs *skill*, look elsewhere! For some, to declare themselves “pragmatists” is simply to say that they are tired of the irrelevance of the church, of endless scholastic debates, of hair-splitting arguments that leave the world-weary saint numb spiritually and physically. It speaks to some of getting busy, of *doing* church, not just *playing* church.

After all, each believer must be conscious of the knife-wounds of Jesus’ words, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...but everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Mt.7:24,26). Clearly, Jesus wants us to be *doing*.

And indeed, we recognize this: we request a paper on “Evangelistic Preaching” because we are supposed to do it; we ask what *methods* have proven effective, and nod in agreement when we are told to *try whatever legitimate means we can* to reach unbelievers with the Gospel. Where is our disagreement, for example, with our church-growth brethren, who most often earn the label “pragmatist”: is it in the fact that we must use means, or is it in our definition of “legitimate”? Is my criticism of their selling out in order to be “relevant” an appeal for the church to be irrelevant? Is my critique of “what works” a heartfelt cry to give ourselves to what doesn’t work? Do we not eagerly gather around plates of food at Pastor’s Conferences to hear how the work goes in other places? Is this not really asking what you have found that *works*?

For example, David Eby’s *Power Preaching for Church Growth* is introduced by John MacArthur with this thought: “Who can fault the goal of church growth? Surely all who truly love Christ will long to see his church grow and flourish and multiply. There’s certainly nothing wrong with seeking the best means to accomplish that end”.¹ And yet, MacArthur would strongly censure pragmatism; Eby himself introduces that same work by saying “I have felt the pressure of pragmatism...The goal of this book is to exhort and encourage pastors and church leaders to escape the full court press of expediency and to restart an offense of biblical priorities and methods.”² So clearly to battle pragmatism is not to settle for inactivity or to fail to care about means to the end.

There is a problem here, but locating the source of that problem seems more elusive than I anticipated. I think I will call this by that useful dodge, “Towards an analysis of the impact of pragmatism”.

B. PRAGMATISM, THE PHILOSOPHY

Just because a term enters popular use through a philosophical school does not mean it retains any of the real meat of that school, but in this case, a quick survey of pragmatism of a hundred years ago may help determine some distinguishing features of the problem.

¹Mentor, 1996, p.5

²Ibid. p.8

Three men seem to be at the head of the list in connection with pragmatism: according to William James³, the first to use the term “pragmatism” in this sense was Charles Peirce in 1878; William James himself gave a series of lectures in 1906 that popularized and clarified the sense; and John Dewey added his contribution as well.

Peirce and James spent some time as part of a “metaphysics club” and ironically developed a sharp distaste for metaphysics.⁴ It was their considered opinion that empiricism had won the day over rationalism – that is, “going by facts” rather than “going by principles”. Pragmatism was just such a reaction against endless verbal debate; a sophisticated version of high school student’s aversion to math, and the first-year seminarian’s arguments against the study of Greek. “When will I ever use this?”

a) *First: pragmatism is a method of doing philosophy*

James saw pragmatism first as a method of doing philosophy, not a specific result. A person could conceivably come to any conclusion through pragmatism. But the method to be used would be to “try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences...If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle”.⁵

This method would mediate between rationalism and empiricism because it would recognize that pure scientism was too cold for the temperament of most “amateur philosophers”. Temperament plays a strong role in what we choose to believe to be true, and we naturally resist changes to our system of beliefs. So while James saw pragmatism as thoroughly empirical, it was presented more congenially: “Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed”.⁶

There is something to the quest of pragmatism that is important. Colin Brown notes “the Pragmatists were right when they drew attention to the fact that we cannot understand a concept without considering its consequences and

³My primary source for the philosophy is William James’ lectures, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, Dover Thrift Edition, 1995. I used this work because (i) I could find it; (ii) it was relatively compact; and (iii) it only cost \$2.

⁴Sproul, *Lifeviews*, p.82.

⁵James, *Pragmatism*, p.18.

⁶Ibid, p.20

relations with other concepts. It is not enough to note the dictionary meaning of a word. We must also study how it is used in any given context⁷. They laid emphasis on the fact that life - views and beliefs influenced conduct, a point that we do well to echo: it matters what you believe!

b) Second: pragmatism is a new view of "truth"

But if pragmatism, in James' view, was first of all a method, it was the second thing about pragmatism that appears more sinister: pragmatism is a new view of truth. He would write, "Ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience."⁸

If I can attempt a summary of James' view: he builds on the scientific model of developing a hypothesis, and applies it to more metaphysical questions. In science, a theory or "idea" is arrived at which appears to explain some part of experience. It is accepted, in that limited sense, as "true". But as further experiments take place, and our experiences grow, the "truth" is strained; because we are conservative about our beliefs, we try to retain as much of the old theory as possible, but modify it to account for the new "facts"; now the new revised theory is "true".

⁷Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, IVP, Downer's Grove Ill. 1968

⁸James, *Pragmatism*, p.23

This is what James applies to “truth”. The notion of truth being that which corresponds to a preset reality is rejected; there are no absolutes, or at least none that we can know. Thus we adopt what seems to fit our experience. But as new experiences come, they place a strain on those accepted notions, and must be revised to account for the new facts. For example, one might accept “God” as a working hypothesis; that term may help explain our experience for now; but new experiences might put a strain on that belief, causing us to revise or even reject that hypothesis. He is careful to point out that pragmatism does not *per se* cancel belief in “God”, but “God” must explain our experience and help us inter-relate all the experiences we have. In his case, he believes that the only function “God” performs is to provide a moral holiday, so the problem of evil does not have to be explained; but it puts too much of a strain on other aspects of experience that point to there being no god, and so personally he finds no use for the concept. In his words, “if theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much”; and the comfort that “god” can provide: “that is part of his cash-value when he is pragmatically interpreted.”⁹

c) *Summary: Describing the philosophy of pragmatism*

So what does pragmatism lead to? As a philosophy, pragmatism can be described as follows:

1. It is *anti-intellectual*, in the rationalistic sense about being concerned about first principles and ideas. James asserts that what matters is not the first principles but the final ones: the fruit of the idea. As noted, he uses the concept of an idea’s “cash value”, what it accomplishes, as its truthfulness. James links pragmatism to other philosophic tendencies of the 19th Century such as nominalism (appeals to particulars, not universals); utilitarianism (emphasis on the practical aspects) and positivism (disdain for verbal solutions and metaphysical abstractions).
2. It is *relative*: truth is a constantly shifting thing, just as scientific discoveries are constantly shifting what is accepted as true. All truth is just working hypotheses.
3. It is *humanistic*: talk of absolutes is pointless because they cannot be known, even if they exist. Whether or not our search for truth is leading us closer to an absolute or not is a pointless discussion. We must deal with what we have. For that reason, James cites both the problem of evil and the relativistic truth of science as reasons for rejecting ideals and first principles: they simply do not fit experience as we have it.

In his analysis of pragmatism, R. C. Sproul adds to the above points by noting:

4. It is *short-term* in its view: “what works” needs to be kept in reasonable perspective; since it is not possible to wait until all possible options are explored, one acts as one sees fit now. He especially sees this applied to politics: leaders see only as far as the next election.
5. It is *subjective*: according to Sproul, Dewey disliked this charge but was never able to disprove it. Quite simply, in the absence of any absolutes, whose standard of “working” is accepted? What “works” is going to vary from person to person.
6. By way of summary, pragmatism is what is *expedient*: like the high priest Caiaphas who determined that it was expedient for one man to die for the sake of the nation, pragmatism makes a casualty of any concept of justice. There is no place for pragmatism to enquire what is right.

⁹James, *Pragmatism*, p.29

Pragmatism was developed in the United States, although as noted above it built on the philosophies of empiricism that were current on the Continent. Sproul believes this is not accidental, and that even though the formal influence of pragmatism as a philosophical school waned in the 1930's, it appeals to the American style of life, and continues to shape its culture. He writes, "it was born and raised in the United States and reflects something of the genius of American culture with its emphasis on practicality and expediency. If pragmatism had a motto, it would be, 'Where there's a will there's a way.'" Sproul quotes Dr. Harvey Cox: "Urban secular man is pragmatic. He devotes himself to tackling specific problems. He is interested in what will work to get something done. He has little interest in what has been termed 'borderline questions of metaphysical considerations'".¹⁰

C. THE CHURCH IN A PRAGMATIC SOCIETY

The main focus of this paper is intended to deal with the influence of pragmatism on the church, but a comment may be in order concerning the impact of the church's role in a society governed by pragmatism.

The charge that the church is not "relevant" is often understood to mean that the church has to say something more and something intelligent about the latest social/political issues. Of course, the church is to challenge our culture, but the charge of irrelevance goes deeper: the *central message* of the church is deemed to be of no interest and no use to modern man. The temptation, then, is to show the Gospel as a useful problem-solver, in competition with better funded and better trained secular problem solvers, effectively becoming the poor man's psychiatrist.

Fundamental to pragmatism is skepticism about absolute truth, since in its view absolutes can never be discovered. Real life problems are solved by science or government, or they remain unsolved. In the eyes of the world, the church has nothing to contribute.

In large part, our answer is to be the church nonetheless, to make our message known regardless of the general opinion of it, and live out the Gospel where the Lord places us, all the while calling upon the Lord to open blind eyes: for in reality unbelief has always been with us!

D. PRAGMATIC SOCIETY IN THE CHURCH

The more difficult challenge is to see where the church stands in relation to pragmatism. If the analysis of Sproul and Cox is correct, and pragmatism is the dominant note in our culture, the problem is only made worse. It is always most difficult to analyze oneself, precisely because it is our culture. We grow up honouring those who are able to "get things done", and have much more respect for "realists" than for "intellectuals". In addition to this, it is necessary to keep in mind the requirement to be practical in our faith. Christianity is meant to be applied, and we are called to find ways and means of meeting the commands of Scripture.

I will therefore suggest areas where pragmatic principles may be coming to the fore; but I confess at the outset some of the lines are not easy to draw.

a) The "Church Growth Movement"

¹⁰Sproul, *Lifeyviews*, p.80.

Much has been written about this movement, and we have discussed it in this setting before; it is not the purpose of this paper to rehash this. At the same time, when modern evangelical writers condemn pragmatism in the church, the vitriol is most commonly directed towards the practitioners of church growth.

Earlier reference was made to David Eby's work on *Power Preaching for Church Growth*. The book involves a critique of the church growth movement for overlooking Acts 6:4 in charting its means to the end. Again, the thesis is not that church growth is evil; it is recognized as the point. The downfall of the movement is in its choice of means to the end, overlooking what God has instituted and replacing it with marketing and statistics, for the pragmatic reasons that it works better, faster, and with measurable results, all calculated to warm the cockles of a pragmatic heart. It is the nature of the book to quote extensively from other authors on the theme of the chapter; Eby includes this from MacArthur, "The church growth movement has formed an unofficial alliance with those who believe evangelism is primarily a marketing venture...Much of the contemporary church is preoccupied with audience ratings, popularity polls, corporate image...and other pragmatic issues. Fast fading is the church's passion for purity and truth".¹¹ As Eby goes on to list the "weaknesses of the church growth movement" he includes in a list of 10 items, "(1) Pragmatism that says 'if it works it's right, if the goal is good, any means is OK' and tends to the worldly worship of measurable results" and "(4) Accommodation of the management-by-objective culture of American business that bows before the altar of 'my church goals', 'my church objectives', 'our church plans' and can bring into the church the Trojan horse of autonomy, pride and self-dependence, under the guise of zeal".¹²

The concern is that the church growth movement takes a passage like 1 Cor.9:20-23, that Paul became all things to all people in order to win some, and makes it an absolute, as if it were the only statement on Paul's approach to ministry. It is taken to mean "anything goes" as far as methods are concerned.¹³ But the passage should be read in light of 1 Cor.1:18-2:16: Paul was quite convinced that it would be preaching used by the Spirit that would achieve the goals intended. That he would be fully committed to this, and spare no effort in preaching the Gospel, and be ready to pay any cost associated with it, only serves to underline his conviction that this means *pleased God*, which fact alone gave it its exalted place in Paul's tool kit.

The church growth movement slipped into pragmatic modes of thinking by asking the wrong questions. The primary desire was to grow the churches; but the theological underpinnings were rusty. As Piper once pointed out, "missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't."¹⁴ Once the goal is linked to Scripture and theology by tenuous lines only, more latitude than is healthy is allowed for the means to reach the goal. The whole enterprise sounds pragmatic: we have a problem, i.e. small churches; here is a solution that brings about big churches; problem solved. Do you have a problem with that?

b) Anti-intellectualism

If the Church Growth Movement is the evangelical poster child for pragmatism, it is certainly not the only place in the church where pragmatic influences are felt. In a book on preaching with spiritual passion, Ed Rowell makes the following observation about the congregations most pastors face: "'So what?' That is the relentless question of pragmatists: 'So what if the Philistines stopped up the wells dug by Isaac's father, Abraham? I didn't sign up for a class in ancient

¹¹From MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, pp.37,80 quoted in Eby, p.93. The quotation is an extended comment on 2 Tim.4:3, concerning those who would have their "ears tickled".

¹²Eby, *Power Preaching*, p.98.

¹³See MacArthur's discussion in *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, pp.159-162.

¹⁴John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1993, p.11.

Middle Eastern history”¹⁵. Since my graduation from Seminary I have fought a battle to learn to be “practical” in my preaching. Repeatedly members of my congregation have expressed concern that my preaching does much to *inform* but does not offer the “how to” that they desperately crave.

Their criticism is well-founded, and the Lord has used such remarks to hone my preaching skills and sharpen my focus. But sometimes criticisms tend to drift a little over the line: almost to imply that some parts of Scripture can be safely ignored, having little to do with “life”. Again these lines are hardly sharp, but there is in our culture a suspicion of knowledge. There is a weariness with some with biblical history; a desire to live among the parables where neat little morals can be drawn, but not much interest in exploring Paul’s doxologies.

At the same time, preachers must beware of driving their people into pragmatic lines of thought simply because the sermon never does arrive at a point. What you believe does make a difference in how you live, and the purpose of preaching is our edification. Fear of pragmatism must not keep us from confessing that it is a means to an end! Pragmatism depreciates theology; if that is what is meant by “be practical”, then we must resist. Our people need to be introduced to the things God has revealed to us and our children. But if we would declare theology to be practical, then make that clear. Doctrine and practice are interwoven in Scripture, and they must be in our preaching as well.

c) *Spiritual Duties as Tools*

Again, where is the line drawn? It is not uncommon for us to seek to manipulate God through better performance of duty; none of us are that far removed from paganism. If I failed to prepare properly this week, then come Saturday I pray more fervently. Prayer moves from the expression of dependence and fellowship to a means to an end, a short-term goal that I will not be exposed before the people.

How will I teach spiritual duty? Will I present it to the congregation as being a means to the end of their fulfillment? For example, why should a believer be counseled to forgive? Shall I say that failure to forgive causes bitterness to fester within him, and makes him feel miserable? Or shall I say that to forgive is to be like Christ? The issue considered pragmatically is more short term and man-centred; the issue considered biblically is long-term and God-centred. In both cases, the actual act of forgiveness may not differ; but the motivation is important.

Again, I am not sure if this is a product of pragmatism or not, but I noticed a generational shift in the congregation I was involved with for many years regarding Prayer Meeting. I noticed that amongst some of the older members that Prayer Meeting was accepted as a matter of principle: it was to be attended, because we are to pray. Amongst younger members evidence had to be offered that Prayer Meeting served a *purpose*: that the church would only grow through prayer, or that they would be refreshed if they attended, and so on. Some would give as an excuse that the meeting did nothing for them: lack of attendance when the church gathered for prayer could be justified because attendance was not *useful*. I realize this analysis may be too simplistic, and that some may have attended just out of tradition or to gain points, but are some things not to be done simply out of obedience without immediate proof of its – cash value in my spiritual life?

¹⁵Ed. Rowell, *Preaching with Spiritual Passion*, Bethany House, Minneapolis, 1998. p.87.

d) *The “Full Court Press” of Expediency*¹⁶

Ed Rowell makes an interesting observation concerning preaching based on the desire of Paul to “know Christ and the power of his resurrection” and thus pressing toward the mark. He says, “without forging ahead, eyes focused on the heavenly prize, my ever-present temptation to compromise my message becomes too much. I begin grinding away the rough edges of the gospel to make it comfortably fit contemporary life, instead of grinding away the excesses of contemporary life until it fits the gospel. I avoid speaking on topics that offend, especially those that might offend our most generous givers. The desire to please my church overrides the desire to please Christ.”¹⁷

As noted by Sproul above, pragmatism is finding what is expedient for the short-term problem that confronts us. When our eyes are focused only on the immediate status of things, by definition we have become short-term thinkers governed by expediency. We are unduly concerned with:

- i) offending others, especially those whose opinion carries considerable weight in the church
- ii) the church’s standing in the community. Over the last few years, I have had occasional opportunities to address various groups outside of church circles. I was a little shocked, given my readiness to see myself as a servant of God first and foremost, to sense the internal pressure to perform acceptably to those in question. Not pressure from the group to modify my message, but pressure within myself to appear as the respected clergy. Is this tendency what Paul rejected when he declared his willingness to be considered a fool for the cause of the Gospel? There may be deeper problems than pragmatism here, but at the very least, there was a short-term goal, and a terrifying, if momentary, willingness to compromise the message to achieve that goal.

¹⁶The expression is David Eby’s, quoted above, *Power Preaching* p.8.

¹⁷Ed Rowell, *Preaching with Spiritual Passion*, p.108.

iii) making adjustments to worship style pleasing to various – consumers? There are those elements of church practice which we might label “matters of indifference”, but does this free us from asking theological questions about the alterations we make? Granted we may make the changes and they may be quite acceptable, but what is moving us along in this regard? D.A. Carson takes issue with a statement by David Wells underlining Jesus’ refusal to give in to crowd-pleasing and public opinion, at least on the level of recognizing how flexible Jesus was to different audiences. The same can be found in Paul’s varied approaches in Acts. The question, as Carson puts it, asks “is contemporary evangelicalism displaying innovative creativity as a function of evangelistic zeal, or toadish captivity to whatever is novel, now that its interest in truth has so sadly waned, in order to titillate the masses?”¹⁸ His conclusion is that there is evidence of both, and there is even in movements like the church growth movement a desire to be fruitful; nonetheless he labels this as “drifting toward more and more pragmatism”, inevitable when there is that loss of interest in truth.

iv) short-term problem solving: again, this has already been mentioned, but in this context it defines that expediency: always seeking to remedy the latest “problem”; which in turn leads to:

v) a level of self-sufficiency: short-term problems are more manageable; given the right people and resources and time, we make measurable progress. It can lead to a level of proud accomplishment without ever developing a proper humility and acknowledgment of the Lord.

E. THE FUNDAMENTAL FLAWS OF PRAGMATISM

Let it be stated yet again that to argue against pragmatism is to argue against a controlling ideology that undermines essential elements of the Christian faith. It is not to criticize any and all attempts to communicate the Gospel in a relevant fashion. As Sproul notes, “The pragmatist desires to be practical; so does the Christian. In this discussion, however, we must be careful to distinguish between being practical and being pragmatic; to be practical does not require that we embrace pragmatism as a philosophy of life”.¹⁹

Nevertheless, there are some fatal flaws in adopting a pragmatic attitude, and thus there are warnings to be sounded where trends such as those listed above appear.

a) Pragmatism is too mechanical:

The whole point behind a pragmatic philosophy of life is to find what works. The overconfidence of the church growth movement seems to reflect this, whether consciously or not, that if the right means are found, the end will surely be achieved. Thus if anyone is not achieving the goal, the means are surely wrong.

On this whole matter, a solid understanding of the sovereignty of God is essential. It teaches that, while there are God-appointed means to the God-appointed ends, the results are connected to the work by ties of grace, not necessity. MacArthur suggests that “Pragmatism’s ally is arminianism...that places on the evangelist the burden of using technique that is clever enough, imaginative enough, or convincing enough to sway a person’s decision. The *content* of the message is thus subjugated to the issue of how it is packaged.”²⁰

Of course, it is not far removed from this if we assume that praying in the right way for revival guarantees its arrival as well. If enough of us covenant to pray together often enough, will it come?

b) Not enough recognition of our weakness:

¹⁸Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p.472.

¹⁹Sproul, *Lifeyes*, p.80.

²⁰John MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, p.152.

That it is too mechanical leads to a failure to recognize our weakness and inadequacy in this task. We are involved in a “problem” that we cannot solve, and, like Paul, regularly confess our insufficiency of ourselves (2 Cor.2:15f.). Modern man’s ultimate problem is not different from ancient man’s problem. Sproul points to Romans 1 as capturing the defining weakness of pragmatism as a philosophy: it is simply an expression of the human unwillingness to keep God in our knowledge. If ancient man used paganism to keep thoughts of God at bay, modern man may use pragmatism; but the fact remains that modern man rejects the Gospel not merely because the church has a problem with relevance, but because he hates God.

Building on this point, Carson critiques the trend to using social sciences, not because there is no value, but because the proponents of this use tend to become unbalanced in the confidence they place on them: he writes,

“more frightening is the impression that the social sciences hold the key for church renewal and growth. The assumption seems to be that we are basically okay theologically, spiritually, morally, in our prayers and passion and understanding, and that if we just add this component we are bound to see fruit. The solid core in this outlook is that we *do* need to understand the people to whom we minister. The falseness is that such understanding and the adaptive change that springs from it guarantees spiritual growth. It may be something God uses, and in that case God is to be thanked, for he is the Author of all good gifts, not least knowledge, including knowledge of demographic profiles. But he may withhold his blessing: he has certainly done so before. Blessings are not guaranteed by reading Gallup reports. Worse: the emphasis on awareness of the social sciences tends to divert people from things that are forever basic: the truth of the gospel, a living walk with the living God, love for men and women, an eternal perspective, hatred and fear of sin, a passion for holiness, a profound desire to see Christ exalted.”²¹

c) An unworkable definition of success

The fact remains that we gain a certain level of respectability and vindication of our approach if we can point to growth in numbers. Few would set out with the purpose of decreasing attendance at church.

Yet preaching is work done by commission; it is by definition another’s message. The “other” is absolutely sovereign in what He chooses to accomplish by that message. My understanding of the task of preaching, even granting Eby’s thesis that “power preaching” is the God-appointed means of church growth, must allow for Isaiah 6! Granted that that may not be the normative passage, it is still within the realm of possibility that the God who has used preaching in the past to harden and to judge may do so again.

²¹Carson, *The Gagging of God*, p.474. He goes on to argue that it is scary when leadership forums in the church boast about not getting in to doctrine, and the fruit of the lack of willingness to address sin is that the evangelical church is hardly different in moral practice than the world at large.

I was interested in Rick Warren's view of church growth, ²² partly because he explicitly seeks to avoid compromising the message (see subtitle), and partly because he does not denigrate preaching, the charge that is often brought against the church growth movement, although he does define it as "preaching to felt needs"²³. But he means topical exposition grounded in Scripture, that having shown the unbeliever the Bible has something to say, he becomes interested in what else it might say; it involves practical steps making the Scripture accessible: printing out texts, outlines, explanations of what is happening, and so on. He spends a chapter addressing the topic, "How Jesus Attracted Crowds"²⁴. He covers the usual territory with headings like "an interesting style" and "related to life". It is interesting to note, however, that little is said on how Jesus in John 6 managed to repel the crowd.

There is no doubt that I have much to learn on speaking in plain English rather than in evangelical code words. Look honestly into the faces of newcomers in your congregation and see if there is a flicker of recognition that they are with you at all. Take the advice of last October and read book reviews, so you know where the people in front of you are coming from. Beware of using fear of pragmatism as an excuse for shoddy preparation and as a narcotic to dull our conscience for our lack of effort in outreach, and perhaps even a lack of concern for the lost. But having done everything, measuring success becomes a difficult task when the Lord has not made me privy to his counsel. I know that *generally* the point of preaching is to win the lost and edify the saints. Eby presents powerful arguments and practical suggestions for making preaching more effective and –powerful, by which he means useful as a means to an end! But I still cannot make a direct correlation between the size of the crowd listening to me and success, which must for the preacher mean nothing less than doing the will of God.

There seems to be a lack of interest in the northern reaches of Canada in these days. This could be because much work has been done, and communities are simply hard to the Gospel; certainly the dominant influence of the Catholic church and the counterpoint of the rise of interest in native culture has not made things easier. But if it is not possible to plant a self-sufficient church within the first "five year plan", is it ruled unworthy of the effort? I know of a couple who have ministered a decade or more in Armstrong, 3 hours north into wilderness from Thunder Bay. They have some encouragements, and many discouragements, but one thing is clear: the possibility of their mission station ever becoming

²²Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995.

²³Ibid, p.296.

²⁴Ibid, chapter 12, pp.207ff.

a self-sufficient church is distinctly remote. But they have built trust in a community where that is rare; they have met a need here, touched a life there – it remains impossible to see what measurable success standard would ever apply. They answered a call, they work faithfully but in obscurity: they do it for the Lord and for the love of lost souls. The pragmatic outlook of our time sits in stunned silence.

The more I consider this, the more the fundamental flaw of pragmatism appears to be idolatry: something has taken the place of God. Eby, as quoted above, indicates as a weakness of the church growth movement that it “tends to the worldly worship of measurable results”. Is that a summary of pragmatic trends generally?

MacArthur says “perhaps the fatal flaw of pragmatism is that it fails to account properly for human depravity”.²⁵ And Sproul, with a touch of irony, claims that pragmatism doesn’t work in the final analysis – if there is a final analysis!²⁶ “The Bible says truth is that which works, but that which works must be measured by the eternal norms of God. The real conflict between Christianity and pragmatism is the conflict between what is right and what is expedient.”²⁷

F. PRACTICAL MINISTRY

What steps can we take, then, to firmly toss this polluted bath water while retaining possession of the proverbial baby?

a) *A Passionate Love for the Lord*

²⁵MacArthur, *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, p.159.

²⁶Sproul, *Lifeviews*, p.80.

²⁷Ibid., p.94.

Like any form of idolatry, it is best overcome by learning to love the Lord alone. Carson makes reference to Paul's prayer in Ph.1:9-11 that the Philippian believers would be able to discern what is best. Believers are to strive for excellence. He writes, "the pursuit of excellence does not turn on transparent distinctions between right and wrong. It turns, rather, on delicate choices that reflect one's entire value system, one's entire set of priorities, one's heart and mind. That is why Paul prays that the love of the Philippians might abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight: he wants their hearts and minds to become profoundly Christian, for otherwise they will not discern and approve what is best."²⁸ He then goes on to make a specific application to pastors: "Do you desire, with all your heart, what is best for the congregation you serve? Then you must ask yourself how much time you devote to praying this sort of prayer".²⁹ While this does not stand on its own, if we are to make wise choices, using whatever legitimate means we can, much of it is learned on our knees. There must be that drive for "what is best".

The effort of overcoming pragmatism is to exalt the Lord in our preaching, and demonstrate how this knowledge of the Lord accomplishes true and lasting goals. Piper spends time calling for "gravity and gladness" in preaching³⁰; openly challenging the short-term, man-centred view. The preaching itself is used by the Lord to fire the hearts of His people. To transform by renewing our minds in view of God's mercy is the goal, so that muddy thinking is cleared up. To succumb to pragmatic requests is simply to confirm the pragmatic mind!

b) Recognition of the Supremacy of God

What we do is done as worship to God. There are goals, and there are means to achieve those goals, but the whole of it is a sacrifice to God. Our concern for means to the end is rescued from pragmatism when serving and obeying the Lord are our prime motivators. There is the careful balance of Paul where he is concerned for the reputation with outsiders of the elders, but yet could say "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court" (1 Cor.4:3). Although careful not to cause needless offence, and concerned that the life of the church matches its message, it still remains that we serve the Lord and are free of all men.

This was Rowell's point referred to above in light of Ph.3:10ff. That burning desire to know Christ and to exalt him as we enter the pulpit is the best way to steel ourselves against the press of pragmatism. And for the preacher to be passionate with making Christ known and proclaiming Him as Lord will ultimately be what helps the people. Piper's point is well-taken when he says

"Strive for practical, earnest, glad-hearted holiness in every area of your life. One of the reasons is that you can't be something in the pulpit that you aren't during the week – at least not for long. You can't be blood-earnest in the pulpit and habitually flippant at the deacons' meeting and the church dinner. Nor can you display the glory of God in the gladness of your preaching if you are surly and dismal and unfriendly during the week. *Don't strive to be a kind of preacher. Strive to be a kind of person!*"³¹

c) Long-term Perspectives

The day of Christ must be a more active truth in governing our thinking and acting. As another suggestion in stimulating gravity in our preaching, Piper suggests the frequent contemplation of death: "Death and sickness have an amazing way of blowing the haze of triviality out of life and replacing it with the wisdom of gravity and gladness in the hope

²⁸Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p.128.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p.131.

³⁰Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, ch.4 (pp.47-63)

³¹Piper, *Ibid.* p.60, my emphasis.

of resurrection joy”.³² I remember being struck with the role of hope in the Christian walk a number of years ago through a study of Romans 15; it caused me to examine my preaching, and to discover that the return of the Lord was a creedal point that rarely showed up in practice – quite the contrary to the NT Scriptures that are laced with references to our hope at His return; and that this hope had a distinctly practical role in living out this life (e.g. 1 John 3:3). A startlingly honest confession of an adherent that she almost never thought of the life to come made me realize how easily we see Christianity only for its present effects and help in this life; and caused me to resolve to preach much more frequently on our hope in Christ. Pragmatism has nothing to offer here, and shrivels when the reality of the life to come is presented.

d) Role of Theology

The critique of David F. Wells concerning the church growth movement is fitting here:

³²Piper, *Ibid.* p.62.

“Two distinct models of ministry are at work in the evangelical church today, with theology in different location in these models. In the one...theology is essential and central; in its modern day evangelical descendants, however, theology is often only instrumental and peripheral...The difference is not that in one theology is present and in the other it is not. Theology is professed and believed in both. But in the one, theology is the reason and basis for ministry; it provides the criteria by which success is to be measured. In the other, theology does none of these things. Here the ministry provides its own rationale for itself, its own criteria, its own techniques. Theology is not disbelieved, but it does not give the work of the ministry its heart and fire.”³³

I believe Carson has touched on a key point when he wrote “Although we must communicate the gospel in categories that are not in the first instance alien to the people we are addressing, our whole aim must be to get them to think and know God in the categories that he himself provided. *Our* analysis of human needs must be based on the Bible’s identification of human needs...What is at stake, I fear, is a fundamental loss of confidence in the Gospel”.³⁴ It is this loss of confidence in the Gospel that our pragmatic culture has produced. It is this loss of confidence that leads our people to think huge tracts of Scripture are really pointless, in spite of declarations like Deuteronomy 29:29 (‘the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law’) and 2 Peter 1:3 (‘His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness’) that seem to imply that God has given us only what we need! It is one thing to say that we need to be more sensitive to the felt needs of unbelievers, and to make the observation that the church is by and large too insulated from the world to speak sensibly; it is another thing to imply that major modifications are needed to the Gospel if the Gospel is to speak today. We challenge the view of our culture that there is no absolute truth; we declare the message that Jesus is Lord, and call people to account. We will recognize their felt needs, but seek to tie this in with their real needs that they may not feel at all.

e) Don’t fear improving means

Perhaps much of the force of pragmatism would be blunted if we made good use of legitimate means. There are books filled with practical suggestions for preaching better. While there are no guarantees, there is no doubt what we have been called to do. Even if there is opposition to preaching the Word, and even if there are pressures against us to be more “practical”, doing instead of praying, programming instead of preaching, preach the Word.

³³David F. Wells, ‘The D-Min-ization of the Ministry’ in *Let God be God*, eds. Os Guinness and John Seel, Chicago, Moody Press, 1992, p.176. Quoted in Eby, *Power Preaching*, p.94.

³⁴Carson, *The Gagging of God*, pp.476-477.

f) Depend on the Lord: see 1 Peter 4:8-11

Finally, whatever service we offer to the Lord is to be offered in the strength that he provides. Our ultimate goal is to be used of him to glorify his name. Pragmatism is best defeated on our knees, humbling ourselves under his mighty hand; and then entering our service for the Lord clearly conscious of our utter dependence on Him for accomplishing anything of value at all, “So that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

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Note: I did not quote from this book in the course of the paper, but Pritchard deals especially with the pragmatism of Willow Creek with respect to its anti-intellectualism: pp.278-282; his contention is that there is a deep suspicion of intellectualism and scholarly work, not because of a fear of liberalism but because of a ruthless pragmatism: "If I can't use this information today, it's of no value to me".

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