

Wise teachers, sound teaching: Pastoral presence

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [December 15, 1999](#) issue

In Ephesus, Timothy walked into a congregational mess with the mandate to straighten it out. He inherited both the legacy (left by Paul) and the problems for which others (among whom were Hymanaeus and Alexander) were responsible. Like the *tohu wabohu* of Genesis 1:2, pastoral vocation doesn't begin with a clean slate.

A congregational mess provides a particularly perilous condition for leaders, for it convinces us that our pastoral presence is vital and necessary. Others have messed up, done badly, behaved irresponsibly, and we are called in to make a difference. The very fact that we are called in must mean that we are competent, that we are capable.

We are flattered, of course. We've been noticed. "We need you," they say. "Get us out of this. We've read your résumé, called your references, heard you preach—rescue us."

We respond to their plea, and become involved in a rescue mission. But eventually we become chained to the agenda set before us, slaves to the conditions we've entered. The dimensions of our world shift from God's large and free salvation to the cramped conditions of what others need.

There's a neurotic aspect to this. It's like a person who gets caught up in a flood and, while being swept along by a torrent, grabs on to a branch and holds on for dear life. It takes days for the flood to recede. Meanwhile, the person holds on to the branch—saved, rescued, alive. Eventually, the flood waters are gone and the poor soul is still holding on to the branch. People come by and say, "Come on down." But the person replies, "No way. I'm saved. This is where I found salvation; this is what saved me. I'm not going to leave this saved place."

This way of life accepts the conditions of sin as the conditions in which we work. Of course, we always work in those conditions, but they don't define our world. They

just provide the material for our world, for our gospel. We do not have to become constricted by those conditions. Timothy wasn't.

Ephesus might seem to be the showcase church of the New Testament. It was a missionary church established by the eloquent and learned Jewish preacher Apollos (Acts 18:24). Paul stopped to visit this fledgling Christian community on his second missionary journey. He met with the tiny congregation (it had only 12 members), and guided them into receiving the Holy Spirit. He then stayed on for three months, using the synagogue as his center for preaching and teaching on "the kingdom of God." That visit, following the dramatic encounters with the seven sons of Sceva and the mob scene incited by Demetrius over the goddess Artemis, extended to three years.

The other Pauline letters were provoked by something that went wrong—wrong thinking or bad behavior. But the dominant concern of the Letter to the Ephesians isn't human problems. It's God's glory. The Letter to the Ephesians represents the best of what we are capable of in the Christian life, calling us to a mature wholeness.

But by the time Timothy was sent to Ephesus, it was a mess. Good churches can go bad. Surprisingly, sinners show up. Wonderful beginnings end up in terrible catastrophes.

We don't know exactly what went wrong with the Ephesian church; nothing is spelled out. What is clear is that the religion of the culture had overturned the gospel. Paul's two letters to Timothy give us glimpses of what was happening.

Paul tells Timothy to deal with "certain persons" who are obsessed with "religion" but apparently want nothing to do with God. Here is a sampling of phrases that describe the "religious" activities of these people:

- putting high value on myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations
- giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons
- being guided by the hypocrisy of liars
- forbidding marriage and enjoining abstinence from certain foods
- imagining that godliness is a means of gain
- participating in godless chatter
- starting stupid, senseless controversies

We don't know what the "godless chatter" was in Ephesus. It was no doubt a form of gnosticism, which creates an elite body of insiders who cultivate a higher form of religion that despises common people, common things and anything that has to do with a commitment to a moral life. Jesus would be far too common for people like this. The "godless chatter," whatever its actual content, would be shaped by the culture and not by the cross of Jesus.

What is most apparent about these phrases is that they refer to a lot of talk—speculations, controversies and chatter. There is some reference to behavior (about marriage and diet) and to an item of doctrine (resurrection), but mostly we are dealing with religious talk. These people loved to talk about religion. T. H. White's description of the older Guinevere, who became a nun after the death of Arthur, could easily describe these Ephesian teachers: "She became a wonderful theologian, but cared nothing about God."

Churches are faced with this problem continuously. The culture seeps into the church, bringing with it a religion without commitment; spirituality without content; aspiration and talk and longing, fulfillment and needs, but not much concern about God.

In 1997 we had a remarkable encounter with this old Ephesian stuff. For weeks the attention of the world was captured by the death of Princess Diana. I knew next to nothing about Diana at the time. But in three weeks I got a crash course in Diana religion—for this was a religious event. Diana was treated with the veneration and adoration of a goddess. At her death, the world fell down and worshiped.

Diana was the perfect goddess for a religion that didn't want anything to do with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but was desperate to worship someone or something that would provide a sense of beauty and transcendence.

I noticed the parallels to the ancient Canaanite sex/fertility goddesses Astarte and Asherah. Diana was a perfect fit for the role: the fragile beauty, tinged with sadness; the poignant innocence, with suggestive hints of slightly corrupt sexuality. Her identification with the poor and the oppressed, her compassion for people with AIDS, her campaign against landmines and the rejection by her husband made her sympathetic to us. She summed up the spiritual aspirations of a sexually indulgent culture that was also filled with misunderstanding and loss and hurt and rejection.

In Edinburgh I watched long lines of men and women and children carrying bouquets of flowers to place on appointed shrines throughout the city. They were silent and weeping, unutterably moved by the death of their goddess. I read the meditations on Diana in the daily newspapers. I remembered that the Roman name for Artemis was Diana, Diana of the Ephesians. Diana, the sex goddess who provided mythology and set the moral tone to the city, was back—the fertility goddess of the ancient world had seized the imagination of the modern world.

I'm not suggesting that the Diana cult of Ephesus and the Diana cult of 1997 have the same content, but the effect is the same. The Ephesian Diana cult, a pastiche of stories, superstitions and systems of thought endemic to the ancient East, served the city's religious needs. The recent Diana cult is also a pastiche of stories and longings and public relations efforts that serves the religious needs of an astounding number of people. Her death brought into the open just how wide her influence extended. Diana evoked the best of people—but only the best of what they want for themselves, not of what God wants. She offered "good" without morality, transcendence without God.

Timothy was sent to Ephesus to counter the effects of the Artemis/Diana religious culture. The gospel that Jesus brought and that Paul and Timothy preached is not first of all about us; it is about God, the God who created us and wills to save us; the Jesus who gave himself for us and wants us to deny ourselves and follow him wherever he leads us, including the cross; and the Holy Spirit who descends upon us in order to reproduce the resurrection in our ordinary lives. None of this involves fulfilling our needs as we define them. Our needs are sin needs—the need to get our own way, to be self-important, to be in control of our own lives.

The wonderful Ephesian church that had begun so robustly, with such a sense of new life—this Christ-centered church was dissipating in a religious stewpot of hyped-up feelings, discussion groups and interest gatherings.

When the church finds itself overwhelmed by the culture, what is it to do? What is Timothy to do? Conventional wisdom tells us that when the problem is large, the strategy must be large. We need to acquire a vision that is adequate to the dimensions of the trouble. But that isn't what happens here. If we look for it, we're disappointed. Timothy isn't charged to refute or expose the Diana spirituality of Ephesus. Paul simply tells him to avoid it. He has bigger fish to fry: he is to teach and to pray.

The overriding concern in the pastoral epistles is for "healthy" or "sound" teaching. Eight times in these three letters to Timothy and Titus we find concern for the "health" of teaching or words.

Sometimes "teaching" is translated as "doctrine" and so we get the impression that orthodoxy is at issue. But this isn't quite right, for Timothy is given the mandate to teach in a way that brings *health* to people. Words in Ephesus have gotten sick; the "godless chatter" in Ephesus is infecting souls. It is important not to see Timothy as a defender of orthodoxy, as someone who argues for the truth of the gospel. He is a teacher.

The vocation of pastor is the best of all contexts in which to teach. But it is a particular kind of teaching, the kind referred to here as "sound teaching." Frances Young translates the phrase as "healthy teaching" or "healthy words." In Timothy, "sound" and "healthy" define the kind of teaching and speaking that is going to be at the center of the work of reforming the Ephesian church.

Paul's phrase "sound words" or "sound doctrine," as J. N. D. Kelly puts it, "expresses his conviction that a morally disordered life is, as it were, diseased and stands in need of treatment . . . whereas a life based on the teaching of the gospel is clean and healthy."

The Greek word for "sound" is *hygien*, from which we get hygiene. The main thing that Timothy is to do in Ephesus in order to clean up the mess is to teach sound words, sound truth, healthy thinking and believing. Verbal hygiene. Healthy gospel. Words matter. The way we speak and use words matters. Nothing a pastor does is more important than the way she or he uses words.

In *The Cloister Walk*, Kathleen Norris tells the story of the time she heard the poet Diane Glancy astound a group of pastors, mostly Protestant:

She began her poetry reading by saying that she loved Christianity because it was a blood religion. People gasped in shock; I was overjoyed, thinking, *Hit 'em, Diane; hit 'em where they live*. One man later told me that Diane's language had led him to believe that she was some kind of fundamentalist, an impression that was rudely shattered when she read a marvelous poem about angels speaking to her through the carburetor of an old car as she drove down a rural highway at night. Diane told the

clergy that she appreciated the relationship of the Christian religion to words. "The creation came into being when God spoke," she said, reminding us of Paul's belief that "faith comes through hearing." Diane saw this regard for words as connected not only to writing but to living. "You build a world in what you say," she said. "Words—as I speak or write them—make a path on which I walk."

But not all people use words that way. There is a great chasm in our Western world in the way words are used. It is the split between words that *describe* the world and reality from as much distance as possible through generalities and abstractions, and words that *express* the world and reality by entering it, participating in it by metaphor and command. Describing words can be set under the Latin term *scientia*, expressing words under the term *sapientia*—or in English, science and wisdom. Science is information stored in the head that can be used impersonally; wisdom is intelligence that comes from the heart, which can only be lived personally in relationships.

If we don't discern the distinction between these two ways of knowing, we will treat matters of the gospel wrongly and therefore lead people wrongly. All knowledge has content to it. But science depersonalizes knowledge in order to make it more exact, precise, objective, manageable. Wisdom personalizes knowledge in order to live intensely, faithfully, healthily.

For science, an item of knowledge is the same in any place or time for any kind of person. For wisdom, an item of knowledge is custom-made. "Two plus two equals four" means exactly the same thing for a five-year-old kindergartner and a 55-year-old Nobel Prize-winning economist. "I love you" means something different every time it is said, depending on who says it, the tone in which it is used, the circumstances surrounding the statement, and the person to whom the statement is addressed.

Paul writes about *sapientia*, or wisdom-lived words, while the Ephesians were engaged in *scientia*, "godless chatter." This is an important distinction because we are taught in school to speak in *scientia* but not in *sapientia*.

I frequently have conversations with pastors who tell me that they would like to go into teaching. What they mean by that is they want to get a graduate degree and get a position as a professor in a school. Being a professor is honorable and can be

Christ-honoring work. The work of research, separating error from truth, getting things straight, training minds to think accurately—all this is terribly important. But it also takes place in conditions that treat knowledge as information, as something to be constantly used. If you want to teach wisdom, you find yourself going against the stream. Educational organizations and bureaucracies have no interest in how you live, or even if you do live.

I am not putting down schools. But I know I was a much better teacher as a pastor in a congregation than I have been as a professor in a school. Virtually everything I have taught in the classroom I taught first and probably better to my congregation.

In preparing to teach a course, I looked through a folder of accumulated notes and realized that I first taught the course to an adult class consisting of three women: Jennifer, a widow of about 60 years of age with an eighth-grade schooling, whose primary occupations were keeping a brood of chickens and a goat and watching the soaps on television; Penny, 55, an army wife who treated her retired military husband and her teenage son and daughter as items of furniture in her antiseptic house, dusting them off and placing them in positions that would show them off to her best advantage, and then getting upset when they didn't stay where she put them—she was, as you can imagine, in a perpetual state of upset; and Brenda, married, mother of two teenage sons, a timid, shy, introverted hypochondriac who read her frequently updated diagnoses and prescriptions from about a dozen doctors as horoscopes—the scriptures by which she lived. (Ironically, she lived the longest of the three.)

Looking back, I could not have picked a more ideal student body for my teaching. As I taught my fledging course in spiritual formation, using Ephesians as my text, I learned the difference between information and wisdom, and that wisdom was all that mattered to these three women. It was slow work, but gospel words have power in them. These women learned with their lives. The three women are now dead. I sometimes wonder if they are amused as they see me teach bright and gifted students from all over the world who pay high fees to be in the class. They paid by putting a dollar or two in the Sunday offering.

All wisdom is acquired relationally, in the context of family and friends, work and neighborhood, under the conditions of sin and forgiveness, within the complex stories that the Holy Spirit has been writing and continues to write of our lives.

Paul tells Timothy: "Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it . . ." (2 Tim. 3:14). *From whom*—that is the only way to get wisdom—from whom, a person. And so what better place to teach persons personally than in a congregation where you have access to everything that makes up their personhood—their families, their work, the weather, their neighborhood, their sins, their stories—and over a period of years, sometimes decades. In a church, you get people in the setting where their main business is living, up to their armpits in life.

I can't think of a better or more important place to be a teacher, a wisdom teacher, than in a church. As Paul put it: "If you put these instructions before the brethren, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and the good doctrine which you have followed."