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# Confessions of a Preaching Peccator

Ken Durham

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As the years pass, a preacher cannot help but become more acutely aware of his or her conspicuous humanity. How could you not, considering all the time you spend pondering life and death, good and evil? Aware not merely of that truth identified in Paul's indelicate observation that "outwardly we are wasting away" (2 Cor 4.16a NIV) but, more significantly, of that truth captured in Luther's famous phrase *simul justus et peccator*—"righteous and at the same time a sinner."

Of course, the wonder and glory of the gospel is precisely this: that though in my human performance I am an undeniably a *peccator*, a sinner who continues to fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3.23), in Christ I may lay claim (incredibly!) to being, in the eyes of God, "righteous"—justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom 3.24). Or as I love to sing it, "My sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the Cross and I bear it no more!"<sup>1</sup>

But because I am a preacher, there is a particular predicament that I wrestle with, one that might be expressed in a slightly altered Latin phrase: *simul praedicator et peccator*—"preacher and at the same time a sinner." Just how does one live within the bind and crunch of that dilemma?

This is, by all accounts, not the golden age of preaching. Around 1950, 10 percent of all Phi Beta Kappa college graduates became ordained clergy. Today the figure is somewhere south of 1/10 of 1 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Haddon Robinson says preachers don't have the authority we once had, that the wind of social approval used to be at our backs, but no longer: "The wind is against us. All our games are away games."<sup>3</sup> In a time that the philosopher Charles Taylor has famously labeled "the Age of Authenticity," in the minds of many Millennials the authority of the pulpit has apparently been weighed in the balances of authentic discourse and found wanting.

Recently in a *Time* essay, James Poniewozik commented on the recent announcements of two notable departures from TV-land: Jon Stewart from *The Daily Show* and Brian Williams from *NBC Nightly News*. "On Feb 10, we learned that one of the most respected voices in media would be leaving his anchor desk, as would one of TV's biggest celebrities known for . . . fake news. That it is not immediately apparent which part of that sentence refers to Jon Stewart and which to Brian Williams tells you all you need to know about status, authority and trust in the media today."<sup>4</sup>

You get the ironic reference. Stewart, the popular comedian *Time* says has developed "a surprising authority commenting on serious events,"<sup>5</sup> is leaving his program on Comedy Central to pursue other interests while Williams, NBC's longstanding anchorman, has been suspended six months for making false claims in his reporting.

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1. Horatio G. Spafford, "It is Well with My Soul" (hymn), 1873.

2. John Ortberg, conversation with faculty of Lipscomb University College of Bible and Ministry, March 9, 2015.

3. Haddon Robinson, "Preaching Into the Wind" (lecture), National Ministry Conference, April 27, 2012, <http://open.biola.edu/resources/preaching-into-the-wind>.

4. James Poniewozik, "Jon Stewart, Brian Williams and the Twilight of the Evening Stars," *Time*, February 12, 2015, 58.

5. Poniewozik, 58.

So there's that age-old question—the ethos question, one *always* worth asking—still alive and well today: whom do you trust? In this particular case, what news is real and what news is fake? Who's the truest truth-teller—the funny one or the serious one?

For those of us who teach and preach the gospel of Christ—what Frederick Buechner likes to call “The Holy Living Truth Itself”<sup>6</sup>—the stakes in public conversations like these could not possibly be higher. The ministry of the Word, if it's about anything, is all about the truth. “Teller of truth” is after all the very meaning of *witness* (*martus*). Yet integrity in preaching has never been more suspect . . . or more required.

It stands to reason that in this “Age of Authenticity” all authority figures will be especially held to account, watched closely and warily—and religious would-be authority figures scrutinized with a double dose of skepticism. Helmut Thielicke identified as the paramount integrity issue—what folks really want to know about the Christian witness—as this: Does he believe it? Does she truly live in her doctrinal house? Does he or she actually drink the soft drink they advertise?<sup>7</sup>

There's nothing new here. If there was one piece of vocational advice Timothy could count on hearing his spiritual mentor harp on, it was “Walk your talk!” “Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. . . . Watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Tim 4.12b, 16a).

Character counts. Always has and never more than today. It counts nowhere more than in the service of Christ. Because “the minister,” the late Fred Craddock wisely said, “works within an unusual network of trust and intimacy that makes the separation of character from performance impossible.”<sup>8</sup>

So there's my predicament: *simul praedicator et peccator*. I, preacher and teacher of the holy living truth, am a sinner. In the words of my fellow witness and fellow sinner from Tarsus, “here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim 1.15). A justified sinner, yes—reclaimed and redeemed by the mercy of Christ (1.16)—but a witness who yet struggles daily with my weakness, my failure, my timidity, my sin. *Simul justus et peccator*.

There's just something about the life of ministry that will not let me forget that. It has this way of reacquainting me with my failures and foibles on a regular basis, whether I think I really require more humility lessons or not. The older I get, the more I experience resonance and camaraderie in the words of Moses. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exod 3.11). And David says, “My sin is always before me” (Ps 51.3b). And Paul asks, “Who is equal to this task?” (2 Cor 2.16b).

I suppose I will always wrestle with that. (I am pretty sure that I need always to wrestle with that.) But I am helped greatly by the story of Israel. Not the nation in this particular case, but the *man* called Jacob, before he got his World Wrestling Federation nickname—Israel, which means “he wrestles with God.” Genesis says Jacob wrestled with the Lord all night long, and thereafter called that place Peniel, meaning “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” But when the sun rose the next morning, “[Jacob] was limping” (Gen 32.30, 31b). I wonder, did Jacob *always* limp from that day on? When folks saw the man they came to call Israel, was that the first thing they noticed, the conspicuous mark of his inability to outbox God?

I recently discovered a good book on spiritual leadership by Dan Allender, a pastoral counselor, psychologist, and a former seminary president. The title is *Leading With a Limp*, and Allender's core assumption (paraphrased) is as follows: As a leader, to the degree you face and name and deal with your failures as a leader, to that same extent you will help create a more healthy environment around you. To the degree you attempt to pretend you have no weaknesses, the more you will need to control those you lead, the more insecure you will become, and the more rigidity you will impose on your environment.<sup>9</sup>

As a leader in a community of faith, he says, I am present in their midst as a “Chief Sinner” . . . Head Peccator!<sup>10</sup> (Can you picture that as the line beneath your name on your business card?) Paul's self-bestowed

6. Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 148.

7. Helmut Thielicke, *The Trouble With the Church* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 5–10.

8. Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 23.

9. Dan Allender, *Leading With a Limp* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2006), 2–3.

10. Allender, *Leading*, 53–56.

job title was “Chief of Sinners” (1 Tim 1.15)! I am a leader—if you will, a chief (a servant chief if I am following the lead of Jesus)—and I am a sinner. I am perhaps my congregation’s most conspicuous sinner, up in front of God and everyone telling of a gospel life that I am not exactly living to sweet perfection. Who indeed is equal to that task?

Fifteen years ago, I found my life and my ministry cast into a very dark place, an experience of profound failure and weakness I never thought possible. My wife left me. And I woke up one day a divorced Church of Christ preacher. I was broken, humiliated, bewildered, and so very weak. I was a disabled man who had always fancied himself outstandingly able. But I had a church family who loved me anyway. I had a circle of shepherds who refused to let me go (you know, that “love that wilt not let you go”?) and in time, by God’s amazing grace, I found Nancy.

But I had to reboot. Reimagine. Relocate the place from which I was to preach, if I was to preach. I had always approached ministry from a place of (imagined) strength. Now, if I was going to tell the story of Jesus—or do anything for Christ at all—and do it with any integrity, I somehow knew it would have to be from a place of acknowledged weakness. If I was to be privileged to lead, from now on it would be “with a limp.”

The place in scripture to which I found myself returning again and again was 2 Corinthians 12, where Paul describes his own wrestling match with God. If we are to take Paul’s language at face value, he there identifies himself as a disabled person. His word is *suffering*—more specifically, *tormented*—by something like a thorn embedded deep in his flesh. Paul writes,

To keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12.7–10)

Christianity’s preeminent missionary begs for healing . . . and God says no! This thing, this “limp” that now dogged his days—it clearly pained him. Paul was surely no physical coward, but this hurt! Moreover, I think it embarrassed him. I think he must have felt that it somehow diminished him, made him feel smaller somehow, and Paul was a preacher used to being large and in charge. And God said no—but not a flat, dismissive, unaffectionate no. Quite the contrary, it was a grace-infused no. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power [not yours, Paul] is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9a).

What I hear Paul saying that he discovered from his wrestling match with God was not that his weakness was offset by the Father’s grace, not that it was merely compensated for by grace—but that his weakness actually came to be for him a vehicle of grace, a means of doing ministry, a wellspring of empathy, an essential frame of reference absolutely necessary to an authentic communication of the gospel to a broken world. He was not diminished by this thorn: he was empowered through it. God was making of him what Henri Nouwen so strikingly called “a wounded healer.” Paul says, “This was a much-needed frontal assault on my conceit, my need to be the master pastor who controls everything, a hammer-blow to my oversized ministerial ego!” He would have liked that line from Anne Lamott, who said she has been made to “feel helpless in the best possible way.”<sup>11</sup>

William Willimon, writing on the subject of clergy ethics (in my experience, something often given negligible consideration in our training of preachers), says we must find a way to own our sinfulness without in any way diminishing our resolve, or our sense of need, to grow in Christ-likeness.<sup>12</sup> “Ministers are only human,” some kindly soul says. Or there’s the bumper sticker that declares, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.” (I think that’s meant to be an expression of humility, though I fear to many in the wary world it sounds like, “We’ve got a Get Out Of Jail Free card, and you don’t.”) Of course we are not perfect—

11. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 263.

12. William Willimon, *Pastor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 299–314.

perfectionistic, perhaps, but not perfect. But if our calling as disciples and as disciple leaders is to walk in the light, as he who is our standard in all things is in the light (1 John 1.7), we can surely never lower the Jesus standard.

I love how the late Dallas Willard put it: A Christian is a woman or man who reads a text such as 1 Corinthians 13 and says, “That’s for me! I will do that. I will live that way. I will fail some days, most days probably, but with the indwelling, sanctifying Spirit of God at work in my inner being, my determination is to submit my life to the disciplines of spiritual formation that every day point me to and move me into the heart of Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

And as regards a minister’s conspicuous humanity, Willimon says, here is something I can purpose to do, pray each day to do: I can aspire to “show the world a way to be human that cannot be lived except by the grace of God.”<sup>14</sup> To be a faithful expository preacher is to be a storyteller, telling the story of Jesus and his saving love. So let my flawed life serve as exhibit A. Paul tells Timothy, “. . . I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his *unlimited patience* as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim 1.16). Paul says, “I lead with a limp! I’m the Chief Sinner; I’m Exhibit A of Christ’s unlimited patience toward us!” He admonished Timothy to “set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim 4.11), but he never ceased calling him (and me and you) to be conspicuous examples of absolute and radical dependence on the all-sufficient grace of God. Otherwise, he said, the gospel we say we preach is “no gospel at all” (Gal 1.6–7). Paul was consistently and emphatically pretty clear on that point and says, “If we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned” (Gal 1.8). Some translations use the word “let him be anathema.” Which is to say, to preach works-righteousness is not merely unfortunate, or misguided, or tacky: it is—to use a word as intensive as *anathema—heresy*. Vance Havner, the old preacher from North Carolina, used to say something like this: “Jesus was not crucified for saying, ‘Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow.’ He was crucified for saying, ‘Consider the Pharisees, how they tie up heavy burdens and put them on the backs of those in the family of God.’”<sup>15</sup>

If Charles Taylor is right, that this is the Age of Authenticity and that is what the millennials require of us preachers, then I say, bring it on. I like our chances. Because I love our champion. I would say to the wary and the skeptical, “If it’s integrity you admire, genuineness you appreciate then keep it real—no spin, no BS—and if it’s the plain-spoken truth you crave, then there’s someone you really must meet, someone you should give a fresh hearing to. I think you’ll find him to be the truest person ever.”

But if they are to get a shot at a fresh hearing of Jesus, then it will not come from his flawless witnesses. It will most likely be because evidences of divine love and power and grace are being seen more clearly—set in sharper relief—against the backdrop of the lives of preaching peccators.

I believe Paul’s epiphany in 2 Corinthians 12, the exquisite paradox he came to know, was that what Satan intends for tormenting, God uses for deepening. The enemy may afflict a servant of God with his evil, only to see that out of that affliction sometimes emerges a more effective leader, a more empathetic leader, a woman or man better equipped—more credible and more authoritative—as a wounded healer in a broken world.

Kingdom service, kingdom leadership, is *hard*. Because it occurs in the service of the greatest of all human causes. And because we so often fail in that cause. But as Warren Buffet says, if you’re batting 1.000, it means you’re still in Little League. Dan Allender writes, “God calls [Christian] leaders to tell a story of redemption through their lives as they lead others in the redeeming story of God.”<sup>16</sup> As chief sinner, as preaching peccator, I am not merely called to *tell* the story of Jesus and his love, I am called to *be* one of those gospel love stories—of how God takes weak, reluctant, limping men and women and uses them to bear witness that his grace truly is sufficient unto transformation and fruitfulness in his church and in his world.

13. Dallas Willard, “The Failure of Evangelical Political Involvement In the Area of Moral Transformation” (lecture), God and Governing Conference, Trinity International University, February 2008, <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/printable.asp?artid=138>.

14. Willimon, *Pastor*, 300.

15. Adapted from a citation in Willard, “The Failure of Evangelical Political Involvement.”

16. Allender, *Leading*, 54.

I recently came across some lines from a folk song by the Wailin' Jennys, which I take as my prayer—the prayer of a limping wrestler, of a preaching peccator:

*I have failed You, I have failed You,  
I've closed my heart, lost my nerve, I've failed You.  
But I love You, how I love You,  
All my days will rearrange to say I love You.<sup>17</sup>*

In Jesus's name. Amen.

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17. Tara Mehta, lyrics of “Swing Low, Sail High,” performed by the Wailin’ Jennys, on *Bright Morning Stars*, 2011.