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Pastoral Impressions: An Essay in Honor of Paul Watson

Amanda J. Pittman

If you are paying attention, you can feel the energy in the room shift when a person whose reputation precedes him steps behind a pulpit and begins to speak. Such a change in congregational barometric pressure served as my first introduction to Paul Watson. Without knowing many details of Paul's history at the congregation, without even knowing Paul personally, I could tell from the charge of quiet anticipation that shot through the room that the person about to preside over the Lord's Table was known and trusted. From where I was sitting, it seemed as though the gathered community took a collective deep breath and settled more deeply into the pews. As one friend remarked to me at lunch later that day, "It felt like the church was *ready* to hear from Paul."

My husband and I arrived in Durham in June 2012, six months after Paul's retirement from the eldership and several years after his retirement from full-time ministry. Faculty friends at Abilene Christian University had encouraged me to make contact with Paul when we arrived in Durham for my doctoral work in theology, commending him not only as an excellent scholar with deep roots in the Churches of Christ but also as a man deeply committed to ministry in the church for the sake of the world. The Cole Mill Road Church of Christ quickly became our church home, and I soon had opportunity to interact with Paul. In the years since, Paul has shown gracious interest in my academic work, has provided requested constructive criticism (including occasional editing), has supported and created opportunities for my own ministry, and has served as a precious resource for the adult education ministry I now oversee.

Even given the richness of my own engagement with Paul, I am struck perhaps more by the lasting impressions of his twenty-four-year ministry at Cole Mill Road. One way of gauging the impact of ministers is surely the stories that people tell about their ministry long after their retirement, and the patterns of congregational life that quietly speak of their enduring influence. In Paul's case, a series of snapshots of his work, drawn from my own observations of current congregational life and from formal and informal conversations with church members, reveals the dispositions of pastoral ministry thoughtfully and prayerfully undertaken. More specifically, these snapshots highlight three ministerial dispositions: *intellectual hospitality*, *pastoral wisdom*, and *attentive leadership*. In considering these dispositions, I wish both to honor Paul's ministry and to share features of his ministry that I have taken to heart, in hopes that others might be similarly encouraged.

Intellectual Hospitality

Paul has a PhD in Old Testament from Yale and is a scholar of considerable achievement, but he may never tell you that himself. One of the consistent observations that his friends and former congregants shared with me when I began asking about Paul was his reluctance to cite his considerable professional credentials, even in congregational contexts such as sermons and Bible classes. By all accounts, the fruits of that academic labor were constantly and pervasively evident in his teaching and preaching, yet they remained implied rather than explicitly claimed. Paul surely had his own reasons for this reticence, but Peter and Joanna¹ suggested

1. All names in this article, besides Paul and Kay Watson, are pseudonyms.

that he might have been hoping to avoid the “intimidation factor.” Instead, Paul was “quietly authoritative.” Taken together with other features of his ministry, this professional humility indicates, I think, a disposition of intellectual hospitality.

Paul’s authority has come from a variety of sources. I have already mentioned the external authority he holds by virtue of his professional credentials. Yet especially in the later years of his ministry at Cole Mill Road, he also had the authority that comes from an extended tenure of consistent service to a single church community. Even beyond that, Paul cuts an impressive figure as a speaker, his strong presence and booming baritone contributing additional gravitas to the well-informed and carefully crafted content he consistently provides. Yet powerful presence, ministerial experience, and professional credentials do not sufficiently characterize the nature of Paul’s authority. What struck me as significant in the stories recounted to me was the extent to which the exercise of his authority involved its restraint.

Paul’s teaching and preaching quietly reflect his deep knowledge of Scripture, expertise that he has continually placed in service of the church. More than one person gratefully surmised that the Cole Mill Road congregation experienced a broader and richer engagement with the Old Testament as a result of Paul’s careful study of the Hebrew Bible. His fellow elders shared their deep and abiding appreciation for the knowledge of Scripture and intellectual rigor that he brought to their discussions about issues facing the church and its leadership; some elders offered to share outlines from him that they had saved for their own future study. Bible class teachers at Cole Mill Road continue to experience the significant benefit of Paul’s contributions, in the form of classes taught, teachers trained, and resources provided. Stated succinctly, his authority by virtue of his professional credentials has been shown and shared rather than claimed and defended.

One Sunday over a decade ago, Paul made the rare choice to take public issue with a popular Christian book that he believed distorted the biblical text. Kim, a new member—a relatively new Christian and a fan of the book—later asked to meet with him to discuss it. She came prepared with an annotated copy and specific rebuttals to some of his claims about the text’s contents. One has to pause for only a moment to imagine various ways in which this conversation might have proceeded, especially given the implicit power dynamics at play. Yet Kim recalls Paul’s careful consideration of her concerns, his openness to her feedback, and his willingness to admit some lack of nuance in his reading of the text without sacrificing his position on the larger theological matter. This is authority exercised with precision and restraint. This is an expression of intellectual hospitality.

If the academy is to serve the church well, then the kind of intellectual hospitality evinced by Paul’s ministry is critical. The table should be set with the best one has to offer, the fruits of one’s own research and study. At the same time, the guests at the table must be respected for the insights they bring and the contributions they too have to offer. Critical convictions about the nature and function of the biblical text, about the best course of action in outreach, about the requirements posed by any specific situation need not be hidden, but they also need not be lobbed from a figurative, enclosed ivory tower; rather, they need to be shared in the give-and-take of dialogue in a gathered community. Paul’s ministry illustrates how the academy can serve the church hospitably, and what it means to exercise pastoral authority with grace.

Pastoral Wisdom

When I began soliciting stories about Paul, the first ones that people told were, almost without exception, stories about how Paul had cared for them in a time of need or sorrow. The readiness with which these stories came to mind is unsurprising. Recollections of crisis and grief, even years after the fact, tend to emerge with persistent and often unbidden vividness. Even the visceral elements of those moments—the tightness of the chest, the welling of tears, the knot of nausea—can reinstate themselves, reminding us that experience resides as much in our bodies as in our minds. The call to respond in situations of crisis, pain, and need is perhaps the most sacred task facing the minister. When people described their encounters with Paul in such moments, they emphasized two things: his presence with them and his posture toward them.

One couple described reporting to the hospital at 4:00 a.m. for major surgery. When the elevator arrived to take them to their floor, they discovered to their surprise and gratitude that Paul was already on it, headed their way to wait with them. The simple fact of his presence, quite apart from any well-chosen words, provided for

them an eloquent expression of his care. His physical presence helped foster a sense of stillness and peace that, even a decade or more after the fact, they were visibly moved in remembering. Another woman recounted that, while most people want to be what she called “fixers of problems” when faced with another’s grief, Paul did not succumb to that urge. Instead, he provided what she felt was most critical to her situation—“listening, really listening to what is being expressed.” He simply remained present and open to her. Like crisis itself, pastoral care is often experienced as much in our bodies, and in the presence of other bodies alongside us, as in our minds.

Not only moments of acute crisis but also the day-to-day moments of congregational life require pastoral wisdom. A longtime member and single mother described how she struggled when her children were young with feeling as though her family fell outside the existing ministerial paradigm. She felt free to bring this concern directly to Paul (what I take to be a sign of the healthy rapport that he had established with the congregation) and she found Paul receptive to her critique. Here again, his receptiveness to others played a critical role in the care of the congregation and its various needs. He not only listened carefully and openly to her concerns but also took steps to address the need she brought to his attention by creating a class for nontraditional families. Furthermore, Paul sought her feedback and assistance in crafting the class, which would go on to impact many families.

Attentive Leadership

The last two sections have recounted the memories of Paul’s ministry that observers and friends shared with me, but perhaps the most obvious legacy of his tenure as minister and elder at Cole Mill Road can be glimpsed on any Sunday morning, when women as well as men take part in leading the congregation in worship. As the readers of this periodical are aware, the shape and scope of the ministry of women is a matter of significant concern, debate, and even division. The discussion and implementation of an expanded role for women at Cole Mill Road in 2004 and 2005 gave rise to all three.

The congregational discussion of the public ministry of women had undergone at least two prior instantiations by the time of the decisive 2004 study, which followed extended preliminary study on the part of the eldership, of which Paul was also a member. The quarter-long study consisted of Sunday morning classes taught by Paul coupled with Sunday evening discussions led by the elders, in which questions submitted during the morning sessions were considered. On the basis of that study, the elders decided that the faithful course of action was to progressively expand women’s ministry involvement to include teaching, serving as ministry leaders, leading prayer, reading Scripture, and preaching or offering communion meditations during worship. To the grief of many, the decision resulted in the departure of a number of members. Even today, despite gratitude for the greater good afforded to the congregation by the ministry of both women and men, members still regard the period as one of difficult, if biblically necessitated, change.

A collection of resources utilized in the study, including PowerPoint presentations, handouts, and audio recordings of the classes, is available from the church office upon request. Having spent some time engaging these materials, I want to highlight the overarching approach to the class and the ethos that Paul clearly hoped to establish. Not having been present during the discussion, and not having observed the diverse dynamics and conversations involved, I am interested primarily in what the artifacts of the study reveal about his own concerns as a teacher and leader.

At the outset of the study, Paul described his role as an “advance scout,” reporting to the group what he had seen in his investigation and bringing them along on the journey. As an expression of that role, he began by considering the principles and resources the journey would require—the necessity of ongoing interpretation, the history of interpretive practices in the Restoration Movement, and the general principles of interpretation. The lessons not only reflect Paul’s academic training but also his roots in the Stone-Campbell movement and intent to equip the congregation for the interpretation of Scripture.

Paul then followed the principles he had set out, looking at both historical research on women and wives and the literary context for the so-called “problem passages.” He presented a variety of possible interpretations, identifying critical grammatical and translation issues in the text when such aspects affected the meaning of the text.

The expressed intent for these elements of the study was not to prove his own superior mastery but to equip church members with key information for their own reasoning about the passages at hand. Respect for and support of individuals as interpreters of Scripture was clearly implied. At the same time, Paul taught and led from his own convictions about the values that ought to shape all engagement with Scripture. In the end, he, along with the other elders, led the congregation through a difficult period of loss and change. His attentive leadership with specific regard to this issue did not end with the elders' statement about the change toward more inclusive practice. Paul worked with women to help them develop their speaking voices, to discuss best practices for reading Scripture or writing a communion meditation, and to practice those tasks in a supportive class community.

No leader can control the outcomes of his or her decisions, nor the way in which his leadership is received. But evaluated on the basis of intent and process, Paul's leadership in this matter shows a pastor committed to the health of the whole body, including both the women whose gifts had been underutilized and those members who deeply opposed the changes. Furthermore, his leadership evinced the posture of receptiveness to feedback and careful attention to expressed needs that have characterized his ministry overall.

Impressions of a Pastoral Leader

When I met with Peter and Joanna, they not only suggested that I listen to one of Paul's old sermons but also excavated the cassette tape from the archives in the church library and brought me a stereo on which to play it. I will confess that I was surprised by both their insistence and their memory. This sermon, they told me, was "quintessential Paul," something I needed to hear to understand the ethos and tone of his ministry. The sermon, it turned out, was preached on September 16, 2001, the first Sunday after the World Trade Center attacks.

Like ministers across the country, Paul had jettisoned his prior plans in favor of addressing the national crisis. This particular sermon did indeed provide me with one distillation of all three lasting impressions of Paul's ministry that I have identified here. His facility with the biblical texts was on full display in this sermon. He not only chose the highly relevant Psalm 37 as the focus for the sermon, but he also effortlessly wove together other biblical texts that elucidated both the congregation's concerns and the themes raised in the psalm. Showing careful pastoral sensitivity to the expressions of confusion and need in that moment, Paul interwove observations from personal conversations and the news. Not only that, but he did so in a way that positioned himself alongside the congregation, sharing in their grief and confusion but resisting the urge to offer explanations. Finally—and critically—in the midst of a tense and fearful situation, he exhibited the courage to call the church to the best version of itself, exhorting his listeners to the love of enemy and nonretaliation. "Those who trust in the Lord," he proclaimed, "do not adopt the tactics of their tormentors." Theologically grounded, pastorally sensitive, and appropriately challenging, this powerful sermon eloquently enacted the pastoral dispositions to which I have pointed here.

Others could certainly offer different, and probably better, distillations of Paul's ministry. Indeed, the very act of reducing twenty-four years of service to the church into three commendable dispositions seems dangerously reductive, for it elides the complexity of concrete situations, the inevitable missteps and mistakes, and the ongoing challenge of leading a community's engagement with Scripture in specific and changing circumstances. At the same time, I find myself deeply challenged, and in fact even moved, by the features of Paul's ministry that were shared with me by those who know and love him. May all ministers be remembered for their intellectual hospitality, their pastoral wisdom, and their attentive leadership.

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