

Watch Your Life and Doctrine Closely

Rev. Terry Cripe

“Kee a firm grasp on both your character and your teaching” (1 Timothy 4:16). Perhaps a brother pastor will (or has) used this passage as a blessing for you at your ordination. I'd briefly like to share with you my thoughts on this wise counsel from St Paul.

“Keep a firm grasp on your character.” That's important because, as you will discover, there are some real characters out there among your brother pastors. We've all heard the phrase, “Character counts.” That is doubly true for the pastoral ministry. Few positions require such a high level of trust for effectiveness. A high school teacher once told our class, “There are four people with whom you must be totally honest: your banker, your doctor, your lawyer, and your pastor.” Look at the list of qualifications that St Paul sets forth in his first letter to Timothy and his letter to Titus. The majority of them have to do with character, not ability.

Yet you will face a multitude of situations that could cause you to lose your grasp on your character and behave in an uncharacteristic way. The child sitting in the front pew sails a paper airplane at you during your sermon. A teen curses you during catechism class. A single mom makes advances during a counseling session. An influential member assures you that you will do fine as long as you don't bring any of those African Americans into his church. An organist refuses to play the order of service you have selected. Someone spreads a lie about you. If you are not maintaining a firm grasp on your character when any of those challenges bubble up, you will lose your grip. In fact, when most pastors have reacted to those kinds of situations in an out-of-character way, they have, upon reflection, said their inappropriate behavior happened when they were tired, worried about some issue in their own family, or were dealing with other crises. In nine times out of ten, your initial reaction to such situations will not be helpful. Rather, if at all possible, first spend time with your Lord in prayer and in Scripture. Then, if necessary, consult brother pastors before responding to the situation.

Even though we are known to be a church body concerned with doctrine, Paul's words about keeping a grasp on your teaching is not to be minimized. It is very easy to "go beyond what is written," as St Paul warns the Corinthians not to do. Keeping a firm grasp on your doctrine means knowing where the congregation has the freedom to decide matters and letting them do it even though their preference may not be yours. You will be tempted by those well-meaning people who will say, "Pastor, what do you think?" For four years you've been trained to tell exactly what you think to professors during the day and to classmates in long-night discussions over a beer or two.

But don't misunderstand this question. The first thing you should think about is, "Whose church is this?" Some will want you to do the heavy lifting and decide for them. You will have far better results by telling them all the information they need to make the decision that they will have to live with long after you've gone. Of course, when it is a question purely about doctrine, what either you or the congregation thinks doesn't count for much. But you will want to be very careful about setting the boundary that separates a doctrinal issue from a practical one. Not everything that is lawful is helpful, as the eager pastor who wanted to place the American flag in its so-called proper place soon learned when he tried to move it.

One of our synod's best ways to help its pastors maintain a grasp on their doctrine and character is the monthly circuit conference. Bring your questions and concerns about doctrine and practice to your fellow pastors first. The conference is your safety valve, where, without fear of censure from others, you can speak your mind and be open to their patient advice and correction. Voicing your concerns about a certain teaching to your people from the pulpit first places you in the risk of having to recant later. Then your parishioners will think, "If he was wrong about that, where else might he be wrong?" In addition, if your circuit develops a monthly schedule of topics and asks you to make a presentation, please give it your best effort as though you were preparing it for a professor. Your brother pastors will appreciate your hard work helping them keep a firm grasp on their doctrine too!

God be with you in your service to His people as their pastor.

Rev. Terry Cripe (CTS 1974) is a pastor from Ohio who has served as the Ohio District president since 2006.