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Christian Leadership: An Interview with Gordon MacDonald

Gordon MacDonald has twenty years experience pastoring churches. He is a graduate of Denver Seminary, and in January 1985 he was appointed President of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Among other books, he is the author of Ordering Your Private World and If Those Who Reach Could Touch (with Gail MacDonald). Bill Mangrum recently interviewed him on a wide range of topics, including leadership, preparing for the ministry, mentoring, and doubt.

TSFB: When did you graduate from seminary?

GM: I graduated in 1966. I took four years to do a three year course, which is by no means unusual these days. I took the four years because during the time I was in seminary, I pastored a church some 175 miles east of Denver and combined practical experience with my theological education.

TSFB: Was seminary a positive experience for you?

GM: I struggled in my earliest days of seminary, trying—like many students—to mix the theoretical and academic with the practical experience that I craved. I sometimes found it frustrating to study under professors who had no pastoral experience and who weren't always able to show me the practical application of the material they were teaching. But I was married when I was in seminary and my wife, Gail, helped me make it a very happy time; and the ministry more than occupied my experience.

TSFB: When you graduated, did you feel you were prepared to assume a pastoral position?

GM: The question is a bit tilted for me because, having grown up in a pastor's home, I knew quite a lot about how to lead a church before I even went to seminary. But was I prepared? I thought I was, but looking back, I see that I wasn't. I'm not sure that seminary can really prepare a student for the ministry. It's one part of a process, and then there are the years that follow. I look back now and realize that the four or five years after seminary were part of the preparation process through which I made a series of classic errors in judgment and leadership as I grew and matured. I'm reminded that in the old, traditional days, a Jew didn't become a spiritual leader until he was in mid-life. I realize that at the age of 26 or 27, I was trying to pastor people of all generations and I had very little insight or experience which enabled me to speak to the needs of mid-life or older people. I don't mean to discourage young pastors, but I think you have to accept the fact that the process of training is much longer than just seminary. It takes a lot of years to understand the nature of ministry.

TSFB: What about the difficulty of some students who feel called to the ministry? They go to seminary, graduate, and then they have to find jobs. The people who have encouraged them to pursue ministry are often not helpful in placing seminary graduates—especially in a mentoring position where they are free to make mistakes and grow under the guidance of one seasoned in the ministry.

GM: If I had a gripe about seminary education as it is today, it would be that it is built too much upon a purely academic model and not upon what I perceive to be the mentoring model in the New Testament. Then there was the notion of the older person leading the younger, not only through a training process, but into the performance of ministry itself. Today we have the view that seminary gives you the degree which opens the doors for ordination. In this system, students receive all the certification they're going to need for a lifetime of min-

istry before they have really performed. They are certified and ordained in most places simply on the basis of their ability to give a doctrinal defense of their knowledge. We haven't made the young student wait the requisite amount of time to show that he or she is fully experienced in the performance of ministry.

We who come from the Baptist or Free church tradition are particularly vulnerable to what you stated. We don't have a system that will adequately shepherd us up through the ranks. The process may become political, and often it's con-
nectional. Sometimes I long for the more formal system of the high churches where one is brought through a curacy, then through the process of ministry, deacons, curates, and finally into the priesthood.

TSFB: What do you see when you look at today's seminarians? Are you pleased with the students preparing for ministry?

GM: My answer is probably not going to be helpful, because we who are older always look on the younger generation with a little bit of horror. It's just part of being an older person that you're not quite sure the younger generation is ever going to be ready for all the rigors of life. So it would be easy for me to say that I sometimes wonder whether the seminary generation today really has what it takes for ministry. When I look on the bright side, I rejoice that the education seminary students receive today is deeper and broader than it was 20-25 years ago, especially in the study of Scripture and in the field of practical training. I rejoice that seminary students appear to be brighter and have more knowledge.

But I am worried about today's seminarians. I fear they look at the ministry more as a career than a calling. There is a tendency to think of the ministry as a profession rather than a call to spiritual leadership and suffering. I wonder whether many young seminarians are prepared to pay the real price that deep ministry demands or if they think of it as some kind of vocation very parallel to being a lawyer or doctor. I get disturbed when I ask a student, "What do you want to do in Christian service?" and he or she says, "Well, my spouse and I want to go to a particular state and we want to be in a community of such and such a size and we want to do this and that . . ." I say to myself (now I sound like the grand old man), "That's not the way *we* used to think!" I remember feeling I was very lucky to preach. I would pay to preach. My first preaching was done 300-400 miles away from home. Gail and I would drive all night to get there to preach to thirty people. For three years I preached every Sunday in a tiny church with 28-30 in attendance, and I felt very fortunate to do it. I was amazed when they paid me. Gail and I never thought of a place in the country that we might pick to do ministry. We were just hopeful that somebody, somewhere, would want us. I think that now there is a tendency to pick and choose your own location, to be guaranteed a certain salary level, to make sure the home you're going to be offered is adequate, the insurance policy is nice, the retirement aspects are good, and the right schools are near by. It smacks of a career orientation to me, and an expectation of certain kinds of remuneration that we in our generation knew nothing about. We were just glad that anybody would be willing to accept our leadership.

I also am a little concerned—and I'll get into trouble for saying this—that I don't see married couples as committed to

ministering together. I sense this new emergence of thought that suggests each is an individual, free to pursue his or her own destiny and vocation. There will be many people who violently disagree with me on this, but I believe that in a world with so many broken relationships, we've never needed the pastoral marriage—as a model lived before the parish—more than we need it today. I'm not sure that we will continue to see the powerful modeling in ministry that we've seen previously, when husbands and wives were equally committed to the ministry. They lived on one salary and viewed the modeling of their marriage before the congregation and the community to be as important as the pulpit ministry and the administration of the church.

the church a modeling ministry if both people are pursuing independent careers. I wonder whether in such a marriage there can be the strength and support needed when a pastor is engaged in spiritual warfare. If I hadn't had Gail at my side to help me see my errors in judgment and to critique me when I was up front and with people, if I hadn't had her to encourage me when I was consumed and empty, I don't know what I would have done. If I came home at the end of the day at the time she was arriving home as exhausted from her job as I was from mine, I don't know how we would have helped each other. I'm scared to think of whether I would have cut it in ministry. I don't know whether we could have ministered the way we did if she had her set of friends and her vocation and

I'm not sure that seminary can really prepare a student for the ministry. It's one part of a process, and then there are the years that follow. I don't mean to discourage young pastors, but . . . the process of training is much longer than just seminary.

TSFB: Let's pursue this complex issue of pastoral marriages. There is tremendous pressure from outside the church, and growing pressure from within, for women to develop their own greatest potential through careers apart from their husbands' careers. The stage is set for marital conflict. Regarding these difficult issues that face the young couple headed into ministry, do you have any advice?

GM: I struggle with the answer to your question. When you talk about pastoral ministry, you're talking about something that is unlike any other vocation in modern society. You're not talking simply about functioning in administration, or preaching, or Christian education. You're talking about literally laying a life on the line and saying, "Here's how life with Christ at the center is lived"—individually and, if one is married, relationally as well. I believe that if you're going to lay your life out as a model of discipleship, you can't give yourself to two careers. I know there are many who disagree with me. But a congregation needs to see a husband and wife who are living before them in the fulness of pursuing a marriage, a family, intersecting with each other in friendships and relationships. They need to see the pastoral couple under stress. They need to see them in all phases of life. That's discouraging to some younger couples who don't want to put their lives in a fish bowl, but that's how discipleship happens. If a congregation is going to see the wholeness of life in Christ, somebody must willingly pay the price to show that life. I'm an advocate of a pastoral couple hearing the call together. Now, I don't want to put a trip on women, if we are talking about a male as the pastor. There are some women who wouldn't have the kind of vocal or visible ministry that my wife has experienced. She has a certain set of gifts and an aspect of the call that put her out in front of the congregation, especially after our children grew up. There are many spouses, if it's a woman we're talking about, whose ministry of modeling will be in the home—through hospitality and one-on-one relationships.

What worries me is whether or not we can adequately offer

I had my set of friends and my vocation. I wonder about the modern couple who tries to pursue a bi-vocational marriage, and whether or not they can do the job that I believe ministry is going to demand in the 1980s and '90s.

TSFB: How are students today different from when you were in seminary?

GM: I think the male student is a little less macho than we were. We were captivated by that typical American male image of the past, which demanded that you show strength. Leadership was very authoritarian. We didn't show gentleness, tenderness, and other emotions which are positive traits and necessary for the whole person. We were not taught to come to grips with our feelings and the wholeness of life. This is the good side of today's seminary student. He or she is much more of a whole person. I envy the young man or woman today who has these opportunities and can deal with their wholeness in life.

The down side may be that the seminary student today, on the average, tends to come from a non-Christian home background. There are more and more students entering seminary who were converted to Christ in the college years. It's my judgment that they tend to lack the basic Bible knowledge that many of us had who grew up in the church. They don't have the years of buildup in basic Christian instincts and framework of thinking. They are at a little bit of a disadvantage in this area. I also wonder if today's student has as much leadership orientation. It could be my imagination, but I don't see as many students in seminary who seem to have a full, personal, confident grasp on what it means to be a leader. There is a tendency to want to retreat more into the group and not take the authoritative position that groups sometimes need. I question whether we're going to see a dearth of leadership in the coming years or whether we're really seeing the inception of a new leadership model. I'm open to both possibilities.

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TSFB: Doesn't this lack of Christian instincts and the dearth of leadership potential underscore the importance of seminarians coming under a mentor, either during seminary or upon graduation, before they assume a position of senior leadership?

GM: I can't underscore enough the importance of mentors. I have studied the mentors in my own life and have traced mentoring relationships from the age of eight to approximately thirty-five. I've charted the impact of each one upon my personal experience and thinking. Also, I have some close relationships with men who resisted mentorship because they were suspicious or didn't want to be controlled or guided; they wanted to do it their own way. It's very clear to me that these men suffered greatly and lost out on a tremendous dimension of the whole learning experience. Mentorship is especially important for those who come to the faith later in life and plan to enter the ministry. For those who had good father and mother relationships, who came out of vital churches, who had models both in family and social relationships, having a mentor later in life is not as important. I don't know that the studies are in, but I would be willing to wager they would demonstrate that those who come to faith later in life and then go into the ministry probably have a greater fallout average than those who came from long term Christian backgrounds. The longer term Christian doesn't appear to be as

ple, consistency of character and a lot of other things. I just shamelessly copied him in what ever way I could. I see him in myself on many occasions.

TSFB: Let's talk about books. What are some of the most significant books in your life?

GM: I would rather talk about authors than books. I am deeply marked by Dr. A. W. Tozer. He did more than anyone to introduce me to the reality of a great God. Through Tozer I saw for the first time the splendor and majesty of God. Paul Tournier gave me a whole view of human beings that I had never gotten from any other source. From him I began to become aware of how deep and hidden a person I am and how much of myself I had to master. A third author was Elton Trueblood, who impressed me with the essence of commitment and a gospel that targeted the whole person. Beyond those three authors, I have been deeply marked by my pursuit of biographies. Charles Simeon has been a model. I have been deeply impressed by the ministry of the great leader of the Salvation Army, William Booth. I also have been marked in more recent years by Oswald Sanders' *Spiritual Leadership*. So I would say that this handful of books and authors really has shaped a lot of my present thinking.

TSFB: Your choice of favorite authors suggests that it is possible to be mentored through books by studying the writings of one or two individuals. Instead of reading a

The world is much more competitive and it's much less forgiving of mistakes; so today's seminarian is going to have to be tougher, more rigorous, more disciplined, more alert and more flexible.

enthusiastic or energetic about faith, but often has greater staying power.

TSFB: Who were your mentors?

GM: The first mentor I had was a man who served as an assistant to my father in his congregation. He was a man who had a great sense of humor, a great spirit, understood children, and was one of the very first adults I remember who believed in me. At the age of eight or nine, he treated me as a special person, not to be looked down upon, not to be ignored and neglected. There was a sense whenever I came into his world or he into mine that I was an important person.

The second mentor I remember was my track coach at Sunnyside School. Marvin Goldberg shared my athletic world of competition, stress and pressure. He was a man who taught me the quality of excellence, to push myself toward goals, to compete against opponents, and, at the highest level, to compete against myself. He was a man who taught me that excellence is a better objective than winning. In the middle of all that he showed me the spirit of Christ in his life in a way that I never forgot.

My third mentor was a single man who, during my early college days, welcomed me into his apartment, and I lived with him for two years. He imparted some personal living habits and habits of the Spirit which I hadn't been able to gain until that time.

A fourth mentor was a Presbyterian pastor and his wife, who showed me the qualities of a good marriage. I ate supper in their home night after night and watched them at the table with their children. I became impressed with how great a home could be.

My final mentor is Dr. Vernon Grounds. He showed me pastoral traits and how to perform under fire. He showed me the relational traits of gentleness, tenderness, accepting peo-

selection of books and acquiring various skills from separate authors, you're suggesting that we pick an author or two and learn as they learn, and grow as they grow.

GM: Yes. Tozer was the man who gave me my view of heaven and God. Trueblood gave me a view of the call to minister. Tournier gave me a view of human beings. I chose to follow authors rather than subjects and allow those authors to rub off on me. When I do my own writing, I often find myself adapting to their own writing skills and viewpoints on truth.

TSFB: You've written several books. Which is your favorite, and why?

GM: My personal favorite is the one that probably no one ever read (laughter) and that's *Facing Turbulent Times*. It was my attempt at a very serious book, in which I described some styles of leadership that I really believed in. I don't think the book did very well because it was rather poorly written. I'm looking forward to doing a revision of it this next year and publishing it with Inter-Varsity Press. The book that has brought me the most acceptance in terms of readership has been the most recent one. Apparently *Ordering Your Private World* has struck a vein of thought in a lot of Christians.

TSFB: *Ordering Your Private World* is really about developing spiritual rhythms. How can the seminarian develop his or her spiritual life and the practice of Sabbath rest while in seminary?

GM: It's hard for a seminarian. I remember the frustrations I felt in playing so many different roles. As a student at seminary, I sometimes felt that I was demeaned and belittled because there was this hierarchy—the professor and the student—and I was frequently reminded of how little I knew and how small I was. But I was also pastoring. I would go from seminary to my church, and suddenly I was the guru of the congregation. There, I was heralded as the spiritual director

and leader, and everything I said was essentially accepted and trusted. But I also went to graduate school at the University of Colorado. There I had peer relationships with scholars in a very competitive environment. So I wasn't always sure who I was. In the middle of all this I was expected to maintain spiritual discipline and, frankly, it didn't work out very well. I wish now I had then had the benefit of some of the thinking of Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen and others. It would have helped me to understand some better ways of spiritual discipline and given me an appreciation of the significance and importance of it.

I can only say to a seminarian today that the sooner you begin to develop the spiritual discipline dimension of your life, the better off you're going to be later in life. I discovered

in sermons, and then discovers that lay people don't want to deal with those issues. I'm not being very complimentary to the present lay public, and I don't mean to put everyone down, but there are many disillusioned young pastors who discover the hard way that you have to be very careful how you raise some of the real issues of today. Here and there are some wonderful, thinking lay people who really want to hear the pastor discuss matters like this, but they are not in the majority.

Let me be fair and address another aspect of this issue. I sometimes worry about the failure of seminary students to communicate with language, thought forms and illustrations pertinent to the pew. I am concerned about how many I sermons I hear that have no discernible structure; they are filled

The sooner you begin to develop spiritual discipline in your life, the better off you're going to be later in life.

spiritual discipline as a force in my life in my mid-thirties, and until then I was running on natural talent. I believe that today's seminarian has to decide that spiritual discipline must be budgeted into the calendar and pursued with vigor, sometimes at the expense of other priorities. Perhaps this means getting up early in the morning to meet the Lord for a period of time and to engage in whatever pursuits refresh the spirit.

TSFB: What are the issues that today's students face that you and your peers could not have foreseen twenty years ago?

GM: The student today has to face a much broader spectrum of knowledge than we did. He or she has to measure the gospel against so many questions that we didn't even know existed. The information age has gone wild, and the ethics and moral systems that students have to wrestle with today boggle my mind. Life was so much simpler in the early sixties than it is in the eighties. They said times were going to change with the information explosion, but I never realized what they meant until I saw it.

The seminary student today has a much bigger world. He or she knows a hundred times more people. There are connections with more disciplines, more books are available, and more choices must be made. The selection process is just wild, and I am not sure how the seminary student is going to make all the choices. For the twenty-five year old person, the world is very harsh. It's much more competitive and it's much less forgiving of mistakes; so today's seminarian is going to have to be tougher, more rigorous, more disciplined, more alert, and more flexible.

TSFB: Given this information explosion and the better education that students receive, do you think that the churches are ready for seminarians who address complex moral issues?

GM: No, I really don't. Most Christian lay people today look at the church more as a haven away from the issues of the marketplace rather than a place to be challenged by them. The seminarian is going to face a tough time when he or she tries to raise questions of some of the modern issues and hears one lay person after another say, "I didn't come to church to think about and discuss those things." There are too many Christians who look at the church as a place of comfort, rest and withdrawal—a place for banding together with others of a fortress mentality, rather than a place of invigoration for both mind and spirit. I feel badly for the young man or woman who goes into the pulpit today thinking that the congregation is hungry to hear both the challenges and the answers offered

with ideological observations but lack applications or illustrations of relevant value. I often suspect that lay people leave the church having had a counterproductive experience, discouraged about the gospel rather than encouraged, because the person in the pulpit did not know how to put the gospel in plain English. So it's a two-way street. I'm not always sure the laity is ready to hear the harsh realities that the gospel addresses today, but neither am I sure that the seminarian always knows how to put the gospel into terms with which the lay person is conversant. I often think that before we let a person preach, we ought to force that person to get out into the real world for at least a few months and thereby understand something of what the lay person experiences six days a week. As a young student I spent a couple of years as a dispatch agent in a major trucking company. I learned a whole vocabulary that the truckers loved to use, and became acquainted with the pressures and realities of life. It was an experience I never forgot. Every Sunday when I went into the pulpit, I imagined myself preaching to one of those Teamsters, with the knowledge of the way they thought and lived and the pressures they faced. That discipline of imagination forced me to present the gospel in a way the people in the pew could understand it.

TSFB: Are today's students lacking this ability to think imaginatively and creatively?

GM: I see some attempts these days to awaken the imagination in a way that I don't think was done in my generation. We were brought up in a fundamentalist/evangelical perspective which was not extremely rational or ideologically oriented. We were not encouraged to appreciate an imaginative view of the gospel. We were not forced to look at it from the perspective of the creative arts, or to see how the whole person could be involved in the perception of the gospel. But I do think seminaries today are becoming quite vigorous about encouraging students to think along these lines.

TSFB: You've been a senior pastor at both large and small churches. Now you are president of Inter-Varsity. What qualities are you looking for in seminary graduates who come to you applying for a ministry position?

GM: Among the qualities that I would be looking for are: Is the woman or man a listening person? Is he or she a teachable person? Strange as it may seem, does he or she like the sorts of people a pastor encounters in a congregation? Sometimes I have a suspicion that some of the seminarians are critical of the people to whom they minister. They don't like their lifestyle or their values and so, unfortunately, this is translated

into a negative attitude: "Since you're not the kind of person I think you ought to be, I don't like you." You can't serve people you don't like. You can't lovingly minister to people that you don't respect. And for all the talk we have these days about contextualization and identification with other cultural groups, we've never realized that it means identification with the rich, the middle-class, the educated, and the suburbanite as well as the person who is in a minority or another culture or lower economic class. But the principle is the same. Jesus was very much able to move in and out of all of these groups, calling the shots as they were, being critical when necessary.

So I would look for a student who is capable of adjusting to whatever subculture he or she is walking into, and who is willing to demonstrate a keen interest in those people, accepting them for who they are. I would look for a seminary student who isn't ambitious and impatient in seeking power or position but is ready to do anything in a servanthood model that would advance the Kingdom. I would like to see the traits of tenderness and gentleness.

TSFB: Power seems to be a key issue in today's evangelical milieu. How does the pastor guard against becoming power hungry? Are seminary students adequately prepared for the battle over power that they will face not only with their board of elders and deacons but also within themselves?

GM: I don't know how you prepare a person for that battle. Power is very seductive. Those of us who struggled with unresolved relationships in our childhood or adolescence often are tempted to pursue power as a way of vindicating ourselves or putting value upon ourselves that somebody else didn't

your friend, you may grow faster and renounce the power trip before it really gets a grip on you. I think there are many people in leadership today who are on a power trip, and, to a considerable extent, nullify the great things that God could do through them because power is more important than serving.

TSFB: The cancerous effects of power don't show up for a long time, either, do they?

GM: They sure don't. It takes years sometimes for them to begin to show. Unfortunately, the effects tend to drip over into other peoples' lives and patterns of performance, and are often visited upon the second and third generations of an organization or church.

TSFB: Let's go back to the subject of excellence. How do you keep the balance between striving for excellence and maintaining humility in ministry? Today's seminary graduate has to market himself as an excellent people helper. But how do you market yourself as a people helper in a vocation where traditionally the premium has been placed on humility?

GM: That's a good question, and I'm not sure I can answer it. Excellence is not perfection. The person who pursues perfection is going to be very miserable. The person who pursues excellence understands that it is simply a standard for which you strive, realizing that you can always do better as you grow. It also implies that one accepts one's growth process each day in its forward movement. There is a certain ruthlessness with one's self while, at the same time, one is patient with others. I have always been a bit ruthless with myself, and in looking back on each performance, whether it be a preaching situation

I think there are many people in leadership today who are on a power trip, and, to a considerable extent, nullify the great things that God could do through them . . .

give to us. There are many of us who are not comfortable in groups or relationships unless we can control the situation. So we are always pursuing control. When we spot that in ourselves or others spot it in us, we need to renounce it. I know only one way to deal with power in terms of keeping it under control. For me it begins with a good marriage. My wife could spot those things in me quickly, and she's never been afraid to rebuke it in me. She wouldn't let me off the hook if I tried to excuse myself. I thank God for a wife who saw that kind of ambition in me and helped me to understand it and control it.

I think the mentor helps us understand the problem of power and how to renounce it. But even beyond a mentor, I think the wise young pastor submits him or herself to those who are older and wiser in the congregation and allows an accountability relationship to develop. He or she listens to older and wiser people when they spot those faults. The most dangerous person in the ministry is the man or woman who doesn't know how to listen, refuses to listen, or resists rebuke. One of the greatest pieces of advice anybody ever gave me was that there was a kernel of truth in every criticism and rebuke. Even the most unjustified criticism ought to be taken on one's knees before the Lord and accompanied with the prayer: "Father, if there is any truth in this criticism whatsoever, help me to see it and apply it."

As the years went by, I really worked hard on that one. Whenever anyone wrote me a criticism or gave me a verbal criticism, before defending myself I always tried to ask myself, "What is the kernel of truth?" Ironically, some of your best friends may be your worst critics and, if you make your critic

or a meeting, I ask the question, "How could I have done it better?" When you pursue excellence in the most healthy way, humility takes care of itself. Although you're creating high standards for yourself, you are at the same time very much aware of how far short you have fallen from the standard; and in recognizing that, humility becomes the reality. When you realize how far you have to go, you're not as prone to brag about yourself.

It seems to me that humility does not imply the unwillingness to put yourself forward for opportunities. I find that in Christian service you don't have to keep talking about yourself. You don't have to keep impressing people deliberately with what you have accomplished. The man or woman who is content to walk into every situation and ask, "How can I serve here?" is going to get ahead, humanly speaking, probably very quickly. And that is a person who is going to be recognized as an exceptional representative of the Lord. I'm thankful to the Lord that I have a wife who taught me to go into every situation and try to think of how I could enlarge the atmosphere in a way that would help other people grow. How can I affirm them? How can I encourage them? How can I support them? Looking back, I would say that the more I tried to be a servant the more I ended being a leader. It just seems to be an inviolable law that men and women who go into a situation with the mind of a servant end up being propelled forward into leadership. Those who go into situations making leadership the first issue, always pressing themselves ahead, often don't get the thing they want the most. People don't extend leadership to those who are out to grab it. People love to follow a servant.

TSFB: Do you think the evangelical church in the 21st century will be reaping some ill-effects of misguided notions of power and leadership?

GM: It would be easy for me to say yes. I believe that the evangelical church of the 21st century is going to reap a lot of the effects of the current good ol' American entrepreneurial system of leadership which tends to exalt a personality more than the servant of the living God. I sometimes wonder if, as a pastor, I haven't participated in that. For all the good things it's offered us, I think the present, over-programmed, highly organized church portends some side effects that we're going to live with for a long, long time.

TSFB: Typically seminarians struggle with doubt at some time in their development. What about the place of doubt in your life? Have you ever doubted? Do you believe all the orthodox doctrines 100% of the time?

GM: Ha, ha! I am a doubter by nature and always have been. I have memories of doubting certain basic truths as a child, certainly as an adolescent. To this day doubt is a real thing to me. I do not believe easily. I do not commit easily, and that has caused me much anguish on many occasions.

When I was younger I used to envy those of my peers who seemed able to embrace certain truths and ideas very quickly—and not only embrace them, but evangelize them. I would go out and try to fill in the blanks as they were doing, only to come away deeply discouraged over my inability to be quite

my ideas, smashed them apart and gave me back the purer part. They helped me purge away the dross.

I am impatient with Christians who won't allow younger and more thoughtful people to think out loud, even at the risk of sometimes being wrong. It's only when we're allowed to debate and discuss in our writing and conversations that we get closer to the truth. Today I see an oppressive atmosphere in some aspects of evangelicalism in which people are all too ready to hop upon a person who says a slightly off-line thing as he is trying to wrestle through an idea. I have decided that I'm not going to evangelize my doubts, but I am going to accept myself as one who struggles in a very arduous way to believe.

TSFB: But, it's part of the illusion that is marketed among seminary students and the laity that these successful pastors, who write books and make films and fly across the country speaking at conferences, don't doubt; and, if they do, they certainly don't talk about it!

GM: My friend Chuck Swindoll has been unafraid to make himself vulnerable and to share where he has struggled. There are others who seem to give the impression that everything is put together, every idea perfectly categorized and boxed. And there is a certain kind of person who gravitates toward that kind of *seeming* confidence. But a long time ago I decided that I was going to be a real person, and, while I wasn't going to drag myself through the mud, I was going to be as honest as I possibly could with people so they would see the process

For all the talk about contextualization and identification with other cultural groups, we've never realized that it means identification with the rich, the middle class, the educated and the suburbanite, as well as the person who is in a minority or another culture or lower economic class.

as enthusiastic as they were. I discovered as time went by that enthusiasts of that sort often were hot, then cold, only to drop by the wayside not to far down the path. This is where Tournier began to help me understand my own temperament. I was a person who didn't take on the whole truth unless I examined it piece by piece, in little, bite-size chunks. So, while it took me longer to come to a point of commitment and belief about certain cardinal ideas in theology, once I did embrace them, I stuck with them. I wasn't buzzing like a bee from flower to flower.

TSFB: How long did this piecing together of the truth take? Were you already a pastor when some of those ideas finally settled in?

GM: Oh, yes! You ask as though it's over. I struggle today with what are the non-negotiable truths for the believer. I have never had a struggle over my personal relationship with and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I've never struggled with the authority of God's Word. But I have wrestled with many other issues, trying to find better definition, to appreciate the meaning of the various issues, trying to separate truth from cultural biases that may have been forced upon me in my world.

I'm always thinking and wrestling. I guess that's one of the freedoms that comes from strong faith in the person of Christ. I don't see that God minds. I believe that Christians ought to have the freedom to take their ideas from the laboratory of debate, to think out loud with other people and not always have to say the *right* thing every time they open their mouths. Many of my present beliefs started out as half-baked ideas which I shared with my wiser and smarter friends. They took

of my pilgrimage as a pastor, spiritual director and leader.

TSFB: You've recently made a mid-life career change from pastor of a large church to president of a large para-church ministry. You've experienced the mid-life struggles and you've written a book, *Living At High Noon*, about these difficult stages of life. From your experience, will you address some comments to the large numbers of older students who are returning to seminary, having left successful careers elsewhere?

GM: There are a number of people at mid-life who have tried the career trip for ten or fifteen years, and have discovered, even if they were successful, that the experience was essentially an empty one. Upon turning 38 to 40 years of age, they realize that their real love is to build into people's lives and to serve people rather than to make money and acquire goods. So they want to make a break and enter for a "second life" the pursuit of some form of ministry. The good news is that they will bring to the church a realistic appraisal of the marketplace and how the gospel speaks to it. They understand what it's like to face the pressures and stresses of real life in the world, and they will preach the gospel in that light when they get their chance.

The downside is that, having made the change so late in life, some of them are probably going to struggle to acquire the strong disciplines that are needed to go back into the seminary world to study and learn. A few of them will not make it. Sometimes when you make a mid-life change like that, you also drag with you a spouse and children who have been living at one standard of life and who have enjoyed a certain anonymity and privacy that the ministry doesn't give.

So people who go into the ministry at mid-life may discover that the spouse didn't bargain for this change. They may have made an initial attempt to adjust; but, over the long haul, they may have a bigger struggle than anybody ever imagined. This puts stress on a marriage and on individual lifestyle.

Also, the mid-life person going into ministry may discover that he or she is very frustrated by not starting in the younger years when one was more flexible and had time to fail. I find that men and women in their late forties who are going into the ministry are a lot more impatient because they don't feel they have the time to make mistakes. They want everything to go right the first try. They want everyone to respond the best way the first time because they're counting the years they have left. When we were 27 or 28 and going into the ministry, we looked at life as virtually unending. So we had plenty of time to learn, to make our mistakes, and we kept saying, "Well, when I get older, I'll do it right." The older person entering the ministry doesn't have that attitude, and he fights impatience all the time. This can be a debilitating experience.

TSFB: Any closing remarks?

GM: There are three or four things that come to mind. One is that I hear very few seminary students say they love to lead people to personal faith in Jesus Christ. I worry about whether or not the seminarian today has a zeal for evangelism and for bringing people into the Kingdom. It seems to me that I see too many young people who are content to herd sheep but don't want to give birth to them. I feel as if evangelistic zeal is rapidly dropping out of the bottom of the evangelical world.

Second, I would like to say to seminarians, "Be willing to pay the price of the call of ministry." No ministry of great effectiveness is ever born in a life free from suffering. There are many times when God permits us to face situations of stress and pain which serve to build us. That pain may come not only in a physical or financial sense but also in opposition and criticism from people around us. I don't see many great spirits who haven't faced the press of pain.

Third, I'm worried that a lot of young pastors stop reading and stop studying. They do just enough acquisition of information each week to get a new sermon, but they're so busy

that they don't keep their minds fresh and raw. I would like to think that *TSF Bulletin* makes a contribution towards the mental and spiritual growth of young pastors and leaders.

I suspect that one finds it hard, unless he has a very inquiring mind, to keep reading theology throughout the ministry because the questions of ministry are more immediate. What do you do with this girl who wants an abortion? How do you solve the problem of a couple on the verge of a marital split? How do you help this fellow who has a drinking problem? How do you counsel this young couple with a sexual problem? How do you lead a guy to a personal faith in Christ? These are the more immediate questions with which we're wrestling, and theology serves as an underpinning to those things. For example, just about the time you're tempted to give in to the persuasive cries of a young woman who thinks she has an open-and-shut case for an abortion, you go back to the depth of theology and once again reread those notations on the sanctity of life and the sovereign and providential work of God in time and space. That creates order out of chaos, and where a more practical side of you would have given into the momentary persuasions on an issue like abortion, your theological persuasions overcome that temptation and cause you to stand firm in the advice that you give.

In a moment when it seems easy to surrender to temporary persuasions, whether it's materialism, hedonism or whatever, theology reminds you of the splendor and majesty and everlastingness of God. I can remember many times as a young pastor driving down Nestoral Drive in Boston, tempted to be intellectually intimidated by the great office buildings and the feeling that real power was there. Or, looking at the sculptures at MIT on the quadrangle, and saying, "Real brilliance is here." Then I would go back to theology and be reminded of the fact that our God has no beginning nor does he have an end; that the heavenly Father possesses all truth, all knowledge and all wisdom; that God has never been instructed or advised or counseled. So, through my continual reading and study of theology, my sights are recalibrated and my sense of what is truly important is remeasured. Then neither the office buildings nor the sculptures at MIT become intimidating.

The Resurrection of Jesus as Hermeneutical Criterion (Part I)

by Ray S. Anderson

"Is Jesus not only the author of inspired Scripture, but, as the resurrected and living Lord of the church, also a contemporary reader and interpreter of Scripture?" I recently asked this question of a class of pastors in a Doctor of Ministry seminar, with dramatic results!

Some, who said they had not thought of that before, were carried away with possible implications for hermeneutical method. Others, apprehensive and troubled, suggested that this could be dangerous, for it would tend to undermine the place of Scripture as an objective revelation of God's truth for us, and as the "sole rule of faith and practice."

But if it is true that the living Lord Jesus is present in the hermeneutical task of reading and interpreting Scripture, what would this mean for the task of hermeneutics? In this article

I will probe that question further, and theoretically and practically explore its implications.

As a foray into the thicket of contemporary hermeneutics, this project is more of a probe than a pronouncement. It is meant to be a programmatic essay rather than a monograph. My purpose is to stimulate discussion and to elicit a response.

I write with a sense of conviction that hermeneutics belongs high on the agenda of the contemporary theological task, particularly for those of us who hold the Scriptures to be the inspired and infallible Word of God. Whatever we mean by hermeneutics, the task is unavoidable. As F. D. E. Schleiermacher once said, "Every child arrives at the meaning of a word only through hermeneutics."¹

But seriously, the responsibility to interpret faithfully and accurately the Word of God as given in Holy Scripture is more than child's play. It is a task that demands both rigor of method and the wonder of a child. Interpreting Scripture is always

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