

Ethical preaching begins with clear calling

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WACO—Ethical preaching begins with a minister's clear sense of vocational calling, preaching professor Joel Gregory told a ministerial ethics conference at Baylor University's Truett Seminary.

"The call is both vertical and horizontal. It comes from God, but it needs to be validated by other people," Gregory said.

Reflecting on his own experiences, he recalled leaving a troubled, high-profile pastorate at First Baptist Church in Dallas and working as a door-to-door funeral salesman and later a magazine publisher. He finally returned to a preaching ministry when renowned African-American pastor E.K. Bailey and a few other ministers insisted he not deny his calling.

Joel Gregory

When asked by a female student what to do when doors close because some churches refuse to consider the possibility that a person might be

called to preach, he replied: “Realize not everyone will validate your call. Not everybody validates mine.”

Ethics in the pulpit requires the preacher to recognize he or she totally depends on God—not the other way around, Gregory told the conference, sponsored by the Christian Ethics Today Foundation.

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“Understand that preaching is a partnership with God; it is not a solo performance,” he said.

“Preaching is a partnership with God, but it is not an equal partnership.”

Ethical preaching demands respect for the scriptural text, the congregation and the “other voices” that have shaped the congregation’s faith—including former pastors, Gregory said.

“Yours is not the only voice they will hear,” he said. “You are not a solo performer. You are part of an ensemble of voices that resonates in many of the hearers.”

The best sermons “are for specific people in a specific venue,” and that means the preacher must know his congregation, he insisted.

The minister earns the right to speak God’s message to the congregation by day-in and day-out ministry to them, diligent study and thorough preparation, Gregory said.

“Select a text and take it seriously in its context. That means a willingness to do first-person exegetical work,” he said. “It means I must live with the text until I understand what it said so I can, in turn, declare what it says.”

Pulpit plagiarism presents a real temptation when “sermons are just a click away” on the Internet, Gregory acknowledged.

Preachers don’t need to footnote every reference book they use in sermon preparation, but they should give due credit when they quote anyone else or use their sermon illustrations, he added.

Gregory called for authenticity in the pulpit regarding delivery, dress and manner of speech. But that doesn’t mean using the sermon as a group therapy time, he added.

“Put away your anger before you enter into the pulpit,” he advised. “The sermon is not the time and the pulpit is not the place to exorcise your demons of anger.”

Preachers must recognize the fine line between manipulation and

persuasion, particularly when it comes to offering a public invitation to make a faith commitment, Gregory said.

“Trust the word and the Spirit in the church to do the work,” he urged. And after the sermon, continue to pray for those who have heard it.

“I was late in learning this, but remember the importance of post-sermon intercession. God gives the increase,” he said.

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