

2nd Opinion: What I've learned from two decades in the gospel ministry

January 21, 2016

Recently, I was startled to realize I had hit an important milestone—the 20th anniversary of my ordination to gospel ministry. As I've reflected on that 1995 August night in Biloxi, Miss., I've tried to recall some of the things I've learned since then. These are not necessarily the most important things I've learned—many of those, I'm sure, are subconscious. But these are 20 things I've learned in 20 years of ministry:



Russell Moore¹. When it comes to preaching, Sunday school was more important to me than seminary. I value Greek and Hebrew and everything else, but absorbing the stories and phrases and teachings of Scripture as a child was more important. If I had to choose between the two, I'd choose Sunday school.

2. At my ordination, an elderly deacon referenced the Bible and my wife, saying, "Son, don't ever get in the pulpit with any other book than that one, and don't ever get into bed with any other woman but her." Wise counsel. [Another way](#) of putting it: "I keep a close watch on this heart of mine; I keep my eyes wide open all the time. I keep the ends out for the tie that binds; Because you're mine, I walk the line."

3. Most of my regrets are failures to be kind or merciful. What haunts me most are not sermons that could have been preached better or ministries I could have led better, but rather people I loved who needed more mercy than I could or would give, or people I gave up on too soon. If I could advise my younger self, I would say, “Err on the side of kindness and mercy.”

4. I cannot overestimate the blessing of old friendships. I desperately need the people who knew me before I was “Dr. Moore.” They are the ones who can knock me down when I get prideful and remind me who I am and what God has called me to when I get down and depressed. As life goes on and ministry gets more frantic, it’s easy to let those friendships grow dormant, and more time elapses between phone calls or visits. Don’t let that happen.

Mentoring matters

5. There is no ministry without mentoring. I keep pictures around everywhere of mentors in my life—those who took chances on me at a young age and who taught me what I know. Most of what I learned from these men and women happened in nonprogrammed times, when these mentors would hardly have known they were “mentoring.” At the same time, I look around at the protégés God has given me in ministry—many of whom I still get to serve with in various ways as colleagues now. Mentoring takes a lot of time, and sometimes emotional energy, but it is worth it.

6. Personal counseling has been as important as study. I’m, by nature, more prophetic than priestly. I don’t particularly like one-on-one counseling. I’d much rather preach a sermon or write an article than sit with a bickering couple about who sent what text messages to whom. But I often found myself with a weekly load of personal counseling. I gained insights into struggles I’ve never had, wounds I’ve never thought of, temptations I’ve never experienced. It helped me, I think, pray better but also preach better and write better. It’s what I miss most about both being a pastor in a church and being dean at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

7. Bible study is easy for me; prayer is hard. I've found that, like Israel in the desert, God often has to make me hunger to the point I know I do not live by bread alone and must ask for the bread I do live by.

8. Nothing can reach me at the most primal spiritual level like hymns I've known my whole life. New songs can teach me much, but "Just As I Am" can reduce me to tears of gratitude. Losing a hymnody that connects generations may be one of our greatest losses as a church.

Adultery isn't about sex

9. Of all the families I've counseled through the wreckage of adultery, I don't know of one where the issue was about sex. Usually, it's about the guilty parties trying to recapture the excitement of high school or college dating and the hormonal rush that comes with it. Our cultural definitions—often mediated through music—of what "love" is and should feel like contribute to this.

10. Most of the theological errors I find in myself or in others are rooted in putting an "either/or" where biblically there's a "both/and"—and vice-versa.

11. It's important to tell the difference between a Simon Magus who needs to be rebuked (Acts 8:18-23) and an Apollos who just needs more patient instruction (Acts 18:25-26), between the Philippian Christians who need gentle reminders and Galatian heretics who must be repudiated decisively.

12. We are to be separate from sin, never separate from sinners. It is far easier to do the reverse. And the charge, "He eats with tax collectors and sinners" still works. Courage means not fearing those who will seek to intimidate you from following Christ toward those who are sick and in need of a physician.

13. The Scripture calls us to judge those on the inside, who bear the name of brother, and not those on the outside (1 Corinthians 5:9-12). Doing the

reverse can make for a much easier ministry—as a hack.

Criticism happens, no matter what

14. You can't avoid criticism. Decide ahead of time what sorts of criticism you would want remembered at your graveside. When that sort of criticism comes, take time to thank God for it. Make sure the criticism comes the way it does for Jesus—in stereo (Luke 7:33-34).

15. Cultural Christianity is a great comfort for some people. These are people who don't have a strong doctrine of hell. If there is no judgment, then nominal Christianity is great, since it prompts people to behave and live good lives. If there is a hell (and I agree with Jesus that there is) then cultural, nominal Christianity is worse than secularism or hedonism or atheism or paganism because it says, "You shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4) but pretends those words are coming from Jesus himself. This leads to death and to taking the Lord's name in vain—all at the same time.

16. Most of the things I considered cul-de-sacs in my ministry turned out to be, in light of later years, no such things. God was using friendships made, books read, conversations had, jobs held, catastrophes experienced in ways I never could have predicted. And those are just the things I know about.

17. I can't think of one thing I worried about early in ministry that ever turned out to be a worry later on. For instance, I agonized for long sleepless nights when first called to ministry about my fear of talking in front of people. You would think this realization would make it easier to "be anxious for nothing," but I still must struggle to trust God.

18. My worst sermons were targeted first at the intellect or the will. My best sermons were targeted first at the imagination ("Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world").

19. I keep notes of encouragement that have come through over the

years—from everyone from my wife to random strangers. My Bible is filled with these, and some of them are even framed. This ought to, and sadly doesn't as much as it should, remind me not to assume encouragement and appreciation but to express it. Sometimes, I think I don't because I fear it will sound awkward. But it's never once been awkward for me to receive it, and I should remember that.

20. When I preached every week at a church in Louisville, Ky., I would end every service with the same benediction: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-5, 14). I read that passage because I believe it sums up the whole of the Bible. But more than that, I read it because I needed to hear those words, aloud, every single week. My life depends on them.

Russell Moore is president of the Southern Baptist Convention's [Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission](#). This article appeared [on his blogsite](#).