

Lessons from 50 Years of Pastoral Ministry

Geoff Thomas *Interview*

Question: *You pastored one church for 50 years in Wales. What was the most difficult aspect of the ministry for you?*

Geoff: I don't think any of it was easy. I don't think any of it should have been easy. I was taking up my cross and denying myself and following the Lord Jesus, wasn't I? So that dare not become easy that I was doing it on the way to something else. So, preaching - learning your trade. I came out of seminary and I was used to being with a lot of guys my own age, and with the tastes and interests of 24 year olds. And I'm here with working men and old people and children, and my first baby's just arrived, and I've got to communicate then. So that was difficult. Having a high view of preaching the Word of God and going through all the Bible to preach it. And not having the capacity to preach through Genesis as I chose to in the beginning. That was just very difficult.

And then pastoring with such a mixed congregation. A third hardly came to church and we had to get rid of them. And a third only came once, and I didn't know where they were. They didn't know where they were in their spiritual understanding. And a third were there - the supporters were there and they were good and they kept me.

So, the preparation of the preaching was heavy at times because you're learning. You haven't got enough experience enlightened by telling stories of where you've been. Like this afternoon, I could tell the story of a man I helped, and how his life was changed. That was all in the future. So learning those early years were difficult. But I had all the freshness then and the zeal and a happy marriage and that was all fun. None of it was easy, but none of it was impossible. That was the situation that God puts every preacher into. I think pastoring also is very difficult visiting. When there are young couples and they've got their children in the evening. The man's out at work in the day. You're not going to visit his wife by yourself. They're preparing the children for bed. They really aren't free until 8, 8:30, and then they're getting tired. I don't know how you get around that. I did some visiting in the evenings to people who didn't have children.

Question: If you could do it all over again, what would be the things that you would change or do differently?

Geoff: Well, of course, if you have a chance of doing a thing all over again, you might be worse the second time than the first time. So, you really have to accept where God has put you at that time. What I would do over again, I wouldn't

do a Martyn Lloyd-Jones expository discourse in the morning and the evening service. I would do a Spurgeon in the evenings. I would preach on the big texts in the evenings. And I would just do exposition in the mornings. And I wouldn't have this goal then of needing to preach through all the Bible on a Sunday. I would think that's too much for most men to preach through Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Isaiah and the minor prophets, for example, and Leviticus, and think you have to go through all those books - and Job. You've got to be an absolutely brilliant preacher to do that. And that would only come after you'd been preaching for many years and were familiar with the Bible and familiar with the history of redemption.

You know how Dale Ralph Davis, how he makes the Old Testament preaching and his commentaries vital by his illustrations. He has a keen ear and eye for that which can illustrate. And I would think if you don't have that, stay out of that. And concentrate on the New Testament epistles and the Gospels. And then, the life of Elijah and the life of David, Joseph's life. I would think the early chapters of Daniel, the visions of Zechariah. I don't think you have to do the whole book. But do that in the mornings. Those from the New Testament and those from the Old Testament. And then in the evenings, "Look unto Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth." "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father but by Me." "The Lord is good; a stronghold in the day of trouble. He knoweth them that trust in Him." You know, the big verses of Scripture that Spurgeon preached on. I should have done that. I should have learned how to preach on the big verses. That would have been more helpful.

Question: As far as your own personal walk with Christ, what can you look back on and say you wish you had done differently?

Geoff: I wish I'd got more fixed into a routine about daily praying and personal devotions. Like, I have a diary, and since 1977, I write 300 words, every day and I'm into a routine for that. And brushing my teeth - I'm in a routine to do that. I should have been more drilled into a personal devotion period, and not being as haphazard shamefully as I have been. Yeah, that's one major regret.

Question: On that note, what's something that's helped you in praying?

Geoff: Having a wife that needed prayer and praying with her every day. That helped. And then the book, the Bible in a year, not the one that you don't start the New Testament until October. Not that one. I don't think that's helpful. I don't think nine months of every year should be just in reading the Old Testament. But there are others which you read portions from the Old and New Testaments, Psalms and Proverbs, and just set out every day and that's helpful. I'm glad about that. And that I used as well. And then a card with the days of the week and the people in the church and missionaries and friends and needs that you add to, and those practical helps so that you are not repeating. I like what Don Whitney writes

on praying Scripture. That you find something that strikes you and then you pray through it phrase by phrase. That's helpful. If you want to humble a minister, you talk to him about his praying. And that's true for me.

Question: How can a pastor deal with discouragement when he has to keep preaching through times of difficulty?

Geoff: Well, I've always found that preaching is the thing that you preach to yourself. Systematic expository preaching - it's so frequent in the Bible - there are people that are discouraged who go to God. I don't just mean in the Psalms or in Paul to the Philippians. But again and again, there are challenges. In the life of Moses, many discouragements. Life of David and Jonah. The Lord Jesus, and people not understanding Him and opposing Him. So, you find that in the Bible. And when you preach about it to people in the congregation, you discover how many of them are often discouraged and fiery darts are there, and how they were delivered. How Jesus says, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done." How He chose as His first calling to accept the Father's will - whatever God's will is for Him is right. And I think it's that movement in our lives to submit.

I don't think I've had problems when my wife died. I never questioned God's right to take her. Yeah, submission to God's will. I think I didn't have to be tested. There were tests earlier on. I had to make some costly choices to show that I was prepared to give up things for the will of God. And when God tested me and I came through those tests, He didn't continue to test me. There were other challenges then in the Christian life. So, discouragements I think, you preach to yourself. And so often, at the end of a Lord's Day, you are blessed. You've met with the people of God and you've heard them pray. I can't think of any other way than not neglecting assembling yourself with other Christians on Sunday as the prime way of dealing with discouragement.

Question: What would be some of the common fiery darts of the enemy that have attacked you in your own life?

Geoff: Greed, laziness, lust, covetousness, pride... oh, especially pride. Question: What specifics about pride - the subtleties of it - have you seen? Geoff: You've had help on a Sunday. You've had invitations to speak and you've been helped in addressing conferences. And you've got a whisper in one ear saying, "You're a great guy." And then you've got a whisper in another ear saying, "If they knew your heart, how sinful you are, you wouldn't be talking like that." So, it's the 2 Corinthians 12 situation of the thorn in the flesh given to him to prevent him being puffed up. Because a puffed up minister is useless. So he's humbled and he knows he can only get by and do what God wants him to do by God's grace. And so all the time, God resists the proud, and then God gives grace to the humble. And God humbles you to receive grace.

Question: If you could go back in time to the first day of your ministry and speak to a young Geoff Thomas, what would you tell him and most stress to him?

Geoff: I'm glad of this opportunity that I've got now to be in a new church, and I'm preaching regularly there. And I'm preaching with the coolness and experience that could only have come to me by my history until now. And so I'm a better preacher. Sanctification is effectual in all the elect of God. And so I'm a wiser, humbler, holier, more loving, happier Christian than I was 50 years ago. And so I love that young man. I love his priorities, his zeal. The things he wanted to do, he wanted to make this an evangelical church. He wanted to make it a reformed, confessional church. And it took a long time, but I would say to him: go for it! That's a great vision to have. It can be done. It was worth it for Wales. It was worth it for Aberystwyth and this chapel in particular. It was worth sacrificing anything and everything to serve that end. And I would encourage him to keep going. God encouraged me and I'm just putting myself back and seeing how God did keep me going on that narrow path and fulfilled these things for me then.

Question: At the prayer meeting on Wednesday night, you mentioned that there were some areas in your life that you felt like were really critical to not let slip. What areas were you referring to and what are you doing to not slip in those areas?

Geoff: The discipline of time. That's the real challenge. I haven't got any hours now. I've got no deadlines. I haven't got to get two sermons ready by Friday. Not filling my time with things I like doing and choosing the good as over the best. I've got to have that. I've got to really go for the best use of my last remaining years. Those are my chief concerns just now. So that I am still studying and still honing my skills in communicating, in writing, being concerned for my family in a new sphere now in which my wife will not be the mother of these children and so will not have the same intimacy with them that their mother had who died two years ago. I could easily drift into neglecting those who will always be my daughters and my sons-in-law and my grandchildren. My responsibility to, in every way, be a model to them in old age of joyfully serving the Lord and walking humbly with God to heaven. That's what I wish to do. That's what I want to do. I want to be on guard. I don't want to throw my weight around because now I'm older than everybody and can pontificate and expect to be listened to simply because I'm older than them. As a young man, I had older ministers talking down to me about that sort of thing. They were saying, "You learn." I know they had compromised morally and they had compromised theologically and spiritually. I didn't want to be like them. I'm not the young, frustrated man now. I don't want to throw my weight around. I believe every minister's on the same level, and that I can learn

from all the young men here who befriended me and talked to me. They have much to teach me and I can teach them too.

So, all preachers on the same level and elders - helpful. And in the lottery of who you sit next to at the table, and talk to people, you learn from them. That's just such a blessing of a conference. The messages are a bonus this week, aren't they. The real benefits come from our rubbing shoulders with and influencing and advising and learning from men, and especially the women that are here. Their concerns and compassion.

Question: What are the biggest dangers confronting the church today? The reformed church specifically?

Geoff: Well, the reformed church is in middle age in Britain. And the mid-stream of any river is the deepest and the most challenging. When you start off, it's shallow and you can paddle in and you can resist the current. But the deeper you go, the more powerful it is, and the more you've got to resist it. And at the end when you come out the other side, then it gets shallower and you can see the end and a few more steps and you're out and that's a great encouragement. Mid-stream you don't have those things. And we are in middle age now. We're established. University towns have got free grace pulpits - six of them in Wales, and there is the Bible belt that stretches right across South Wales where the majority of the people live. There are churches you can go to. It's the enticement of the new. That's the challenge - that is a challenge. Then, new songs and the neglect of the whole riches of hymnology. Moses' psalm written years before Christ. And then the paraphrases of the New Testament. Bernard of Clairveaux, Luther, John Mason of the Puritan period, and then Wesley, and then Watts - the whole vast riches; the words so wonderful. There have been lovely tunes written that have revived some of them - overdone. But that's been the case. They're jazzed up a bit. We've moved to listening to a group singing and then our own voices drop. That's a danger. Worldliness and personality cult. Those are the sorts of dangers. We haven't got the big personalities any longer.

Now that Dr. Lloyd-Jones has left us, there is no one person who you can announce he's preaching and people will come and hear. Those days have gone. God's way now for the reformed church is a very modest way, but very powerful. We've got our congregations smaller, unknown by the world. We've got Christian families - children are taught and raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. There's homeschooling, Christian schools. There are websites. There are magazines. There are publishing houses. There are Christian conferences and ministers return those in conferences? And we meet together and arrange our next meetings and speak, discuss moral and theological issues confronting the church. And it's all done - it's very, very big, right across England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland.

There are these networks and there is this work going on. And it's the same in America too. Just the same. There are one or two famous people, but there aren't many, and that isn't God's way. God's way now is just protecting us by our smallness and encouraging us in our strengths of conviction. And He's preparing us for a time when blessing might come. And there's a network of men and ministries that can address sudden insurge of hungry, convicted people - old and young.

Question: What book or person has made a great impact on your life and why?

Geoff: That's an interesting question because you asked for one and that's good. And most men answering that question would say, well, let me give you three. And that's okay too, but I like the challenge of just giving you one name. I would probably say Iain Murray. Iain Murray's friendship and that I write to him most days. Now that I'm here, telling him everything. I'll tell him tonight in my letter that we had this interview. I might not tell him that I said he had the most influence. But Iain's been a counselor. He has insights that are so very helpful. I've read everything that he's written and find him so fresh always, and so disciplined. He's now 87 years of age, and yet he has the physique and the thinking and the joie de vivre of someone sixty years younger. Always the new books that he writes - invaluable. And Dr. Lloyd-Jones can bless God and the members of Lloyd-Jones' family can bless God as Dr. Johnson has Boswell to write his life, so Lloyd-Jones had Iain Murray of all people. To give those two volumes - that should never go out of print until the return of Christ. And they present Lloyd-Jones and his single volume on Lloyd-Jones, his afterthoughts, and his theological criticisms, so graciously and kindly stated. And they are very valuable too. So, you know, all of us are good in knowing the moral issues that face a Christian. And all of us are good in the doctrinal issues where error and heresy are, the dangers we have to avoid. You and I would be in 99.9% agreement on those things. And Iain is excellent in those things. But where he is very good is in his judgment of people; in his evaluation of men. And his generosity of spirit towards men. And in his willingness to train young men and his seeing of a talent and his appreciation. He's brought men there and he's appointed men. Reformed Baptist now. Jonathan Watson and John Rollinson - two Reformed Baptists. They were running the office manager and the general editor of Banner of Truth. The ones who choose the books and so on. Reformed Baptists. And some are on the trusteeship. Trustees only meet once or twice a year for a day or two. But the practical work day by day. Iain doesn't absolutize Presbyterianism - he's a presbyterian, and he defends it, and believes it very much. But he's also generous in his spirit and discerning, so that we are so glad of him. Joel Beeke has much the same spirit. They've done me so much good.

People are always saying to me, how is it that you went as a Baptist to Westminster Seminary, and after three years, you came out a Baptist? I say, well, it was a gut instinct at first. It was that I was so thankful to the tradition that I'd grown up in, that didn't allow me to think I was a Christian until I was converted. They didn't confuse me by saying I was a covenant child. But it preached a summons to repentance and baptism. When I asked Ian D. Campbell, I said to him - he was speaking and I was chairing the meetings. We had a question session afterwards. I said to Ian D. Campbell, "Now, you have three children and I have three children. And when your three children were born, days after they were born, you baptized them all. One by one you baptized them. And I had three children, and I never baptized them, until they showed new covenant faith; until they confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, then I baptized them and allowed them to the Table at that time to covenant fellowship. What advantage did your children have from being baptized by you that my children didn't have?" And Ian Campbell's reply was, "None whatsoever." They had no spiritual advantage in being baptized when my children were not baptized. And it was really that conviction that helped me to be wary of this enormous division that has caused our dear brothers - oh, the great, great men in the church who have been presbyterians and paedobaptists. They're wonderful men. The Puritans. Calvin and the Reformers. The martyrs. Whitefield. Men we've talked about this afternoon. Ichabod Spencer. The pastors. So many men today who lay down their lives for Christ. So, I wish that this division had not occurred. And I hope that we can write persuasively to show them their error. And that they too can see that the baptism of believers is what you get in the New Testament. And it's that hermeneutic that we take back with us into the Old Testament, and not impose upon the New Testament the old covenant legislation.

Question: Was that your new book you're working on?

Geoff: No, no, no... it's not. I'm not smart enough to write that. The men here who've written on it. The number of books that Baptists have written in the last 40 years...

Very good. Let's pray together.

Lord, this is so dangerously ego reinforcing to be treated as though I was the fount of knowledge and wisdom and even self-knowledge and self-analysis, and all these things are muddled and corrupted by my sin; come from lack of seeking Thy face and walking closely with Thee to heaven. Forgive, I beseech Thee, and if there are things that are going to hurt anyone, then don't let this go any further. But Lord, if it can be a help, then do bless it to the good of souls unto the church of Jesus Christ and the cause of the King of Kings.