

# WHEN GOD ATTACKS YOUR THEOLOGY

Pastor Rick Bridston - Lutheran Brethren Seminary Graduation 2010

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In 1973, the same year I graduated from this seminary, an African-American preacher from Philadelphia gave the commencement address at Yale Divinity School. His text was 1 Peter 5:6. "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time." The preacher looked up from his Bible and said to the graduates, "This is your last proud day. Because if you aren't humble now, when you go out into the churches, they will make you humble."

After 37 years of ministry, I have come to the conclusion that he may be right, or he may be wrong. You may or may not be humbled in the pastorate. But you mostly likely will be humiliated. Whether your humiliation results in greater humility will be a measure of your theology.

Humiliation can come in many ways in a local parish. You may soon discover that clergy are no longer the respected icons of the community they once were. In recent surveys, ministers do rank higher than member of congress, but there are many professions which rank far above us in public esteem.

You may be humiliated when people learn that you can't stay on the pedestal they have put you on. Someone will discover one day that you aren't without sin, that you struggle with anger issues, or lust, or over-sensitivity. If your theology, the framework through which you understand God and His kingdom, is Biblical, you can survive. If your people have been taught the realities of sin and grace, they can too.

You may be humiliated when it is discovered that you don't have all the gifts and qualities people call for in the modern pastorate. One of my new experiences since becoming a Regional Pastor is meeting with call committees. That's one room most parish pastors have never entered. And that can be a trip to Fantasyland!

Now don't get me wrong. The people on most call committees are wonderful people, active in their congregations. They love the Lord and they love His church. But when they sit down to discuss what kind of a future pastor they want, they often lose all sense of reality. What they want is a combination of Billy Graham, Rick Warren, Mother Theresa, and, for some, Harry Potter. What they get is you and me—spiritually gifted but painfully limited sinners.

It's a cliché to say that no pastor has all the gifts necessary for a totally successful ministry. Not one of us excels in everything: preaching, teaching, planning, visiting, counseling, leading, fund raising, "visioning" and playing the guitar. We all have our strengths and weaknesses. And that would not be such a problem for us if we had good theology. But every one of us enters the ministry chock full of the theology of glory. Theology in real life isn't about passing tests. It defines how we relate to God and people.

Having a theology of glory is as natural to us as sneezing and yawning. We are born with it. It's "Humanity 101." A theology of glory means we try to use God to make us feel good about ourselves. It's a gospel that tries to make up for our feelings of deficiency and shame by feeding our self-righteousness. In this case, we need people to see us as good pastors—for our own glory.

The theology of glory insinuates itself into every inch of religious life. It was there in one of my earlier statements: "No pastor has all the gifts necessary for totally successful ministry." There it is, hidden in the word "successful." What is a successful ministry in the eyes of other people? A church that's growing in numbers, a pastor who's growing in reputation, a budget that's growing in the bottom line?

Well, if that's your definition of successful ministry, have you thought about the fact that you don't even have to be a Christian to do that? Given the right talents and the right situation, anybody can grow a successful church. The largest congregation in America does not preach the cross of Christ, but prosperity and self-esteem.

If you want to judge yourself by the meat-grinder of earthly success—and that's what most church growth is, earthly success—well go to it. But you had better realize ahead of time that most intelligent business executives would not take this job in a hundred years. The chances of earthly success in parish ministry are not very good. Most churches in America are not growing. It takes that magic formula of (1) highly gifted pastor, (2) highly motivated leadership, and (3) highly accessible demographic, to make it happen. Of the 400,000 clergy in America, how many of them have built mega-churches—or even big churches?

Ok. So maybe you're realistic enough to put away thoughts of becoming a famous mega-church pastor, or even becoming the envy of your seminary classmates. You are still probably going out into the ministry on the glory road. That's because we all walk that road.

The glory road is our detour around the cross. On this road we don't need to die, we just need to improve. We need to raise our scores. So we try to repair the ravages of sin with human achievement.

Again, this glory need is different in every person. You may need fame, you may need affirmation, you may need to be needed. But whatever your needs are, if you try to satisfy them in parish ministry I can guarantee you a life of frustration.

You see, the local parish can be a trap for new pastors. Here is a group of fellow believers welcoming you into their fellowship. What could be nicer than that? The problem is that this is a fellowship of sinners. It is bedeviled by the wounds and scars and bitter roots of sin. You are going to discover good friends, amazing love, and some touches of true community. But you are also going to discover a patchwork of unhealed wounds, unresolved conflicts, unfinished ego-contests, and some individuals with bottomless pits of neediness. And most significant of all, you are going into the middle of a group of people whom you cannot control.

It's when you place your need for glory in the hands of people who are beyond your control that you will be humiliated. They will not always do what you want them to do or act like you want them to act. You will experience the wounds of faithless friends and the claws of well-intentioned dragons. There will be times when your need for glory will be lost in the crowd of other people's agendas.

What do you do then? Depending on your own proclivities, you will either react in pride or despair. In pride you will come out fighting, transferring your own pain onto the backs of others. Wherever you go, conflict will follow you. Or you can react in despair, turning inward and withdrawing from relationships. Like Elijah, you can retreat into your own private cave. The danger here is that your momentary despair can become long term depression. The ministry will begin to drain your soul. (And I don't have time today to talk about the family issues that arise in the parsonage.)

So your glory has been tarnished. Your plans have come to nothing. You have been unmasked as not omniscient. You enter the valley of humiliation. And it is here, and only here, that you can begin to learn good theology. Here in this valley you can begin to walk the road of the cross. You can begin to see that the Gospel is about God's miracle of grace. It's about Lazarus waddling out of the tomb. It's about Paul knocked blind on the road. It's about an ordinary sinner like you bringing words of life to other sinners, words that wash them with forgiveness, and renew them with hope, and heal them with love. It's not about you. It's about Jesus Christ.

Now I hope you work hard at being a good pastor. I hope you go to the seminars and take the classes that will improve your skills. I hope you learn from your mistakes and recover from your failures. But you will find little joy in the ministry until you begin to learn that it's not about you and your glory.

You are really no more than the bread and wine on the altar, the water in the font—you are the mud and spit He rubs into the eyes of the blind. Your voice, whether eloquent or stumbling, carries the joyful sound of redemption. People will be touched by God as much through your struggles and weaknesses as they will through your strengths and your successes. This is the theology of the cross.

And this theology cannot be learned through applause. It can only be learned through repentance, and failure, and suffering. It can only be learned as you discover that He really is the vine, and you are only branches. The way of the cross is the path that every Christian is called to walk. And you, honored graduates, are called to be scouts along that road, showing fellow sinners and misfits that "His strength is made perfect in weakness." God will attack your theology of glory so that you can learn to point beyond yourself to the Savior, who brings life out of death, beauty from ashes, and hope from despair.

Welcome, then, to a calling that is humanly impossible. Welcome to the Calvary road, where Jesus Christ is waiting to reveal His glory.