

Witness
OF A FRAGILE SERVANT

*A Personal Look
at Pastoral Preaching*

CHARLES B. BUGG

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*To Diane, whose love for God, love for others,
and love for me have inspired me
more than she will ever know.*



Introduction



While I'm not quite ready to be taken out of the ball game, I realize that I'm well into the second half of my active ministry. Recently, I had a birthday and understood again that when it comes to age, we count up and not down.

I turned fifty-nine. I'm at a point in my life when I'm active, healthy, able to teach what I love, part of a wonderful seminary community, and preaching every Sunday but don't have to attend deacons', finance, or personnel committee meetings anymore. To all the laypeople who attended those meetings with me throughout the years, I like you—but I wish we could have spent our time in a different venue.

I'm also getting more reflective as I get older. I'm trying not to be obnoxious about it. I don't ask my family to sit and listen to old preacher stories, but once in a while I find myself talking about some past event and saying, "What did you think about what happened?"

Because I love preaching and I love the community of faith we call church, I decided to write this book on "pastoral preaching." The only way for me to write this kind of book is from a personal perspective. That's why I've titled it *Witness of a Fragile Servant*. You will see in the book that I'm the "fragile servant." You will also see that I've not touched on every component of pastoral preaching. I've tried to make this more than a "how-to" book. In sharing some of my brittleness, I hope to help and maybe offer a learning experience to some of my colleagues in the ministry.

I want to express my appreciation to people who have called me to be their pastor. While my résumé includes names of churches, I always think of the *people* in those churches. Even at the student church I left thirty years ago, people like Elmo Chasteen and Cora Etta Henry were church to me and to one another. What a privilege to have people who allow you into their

lives, who come to know your strengths and weaknesses, and then give you the opportunity to say a word to them each week.

I want to thank ministers I've come to know. All of us who are ministers need someone to listen. I've had those who have listened to me, and I've tried to listen to others. You have to be called by God to be a pastor. The pastorate is a demanding profession requiring a multiplicity of gifts and the ability to see both praise and criticism in proper perspective. Often, pastors don't see the results of their preaching and their ministries, so the call to be a pastor requires someone who knows within herself or himself that she or he is making a difference. However, the church is the most critical place in the formation of people's faith. My prayers and appreciation go to those who labor, often without much recognition in the place where God has called them.

I also want to thank those who have been my students through the years. Sometimes, I don't even know why I call them my students. In more instances than they realize, they have become my teachers. Several times each year I try to schedule occasions where I can preach in a student's church or go to be with my former students. They make me so proud. They are committed to the ministry; they care about people; and their skills in ministry are encouraging to me.

Those who know me understand that my typing and computer skills leave much to be desired. I have promised my children, who are thoroughly embarrassed that their dad still uses legal pads and a pen, that I will address my "computer-challenged" status as soon as I run out of my collection of legal pads. What Laura Beth and David don't know is that I have enough pads stashed away to make it to the end of my career. But I do want to thank Laura Beth, my daughter, and Stephen Cook, my teaching assistant at Baptist Theological Seminary, for taking bad penmanship and transforming it to hard copies and to disks.

Finally, I want to thank my family. I've saved the best for last. Laura Beth and David have brought me enormous joy and pride. Laura Beth has picked up the theological mantle and is in the process of writing her doctoral dissertation at Harvard Divinity School. She has brought a new member to our family, her husband Bryan Gaensler. Bryan is an astrophysicist who comes from Australia. His favorite sports are cricket and rugby. Knowing virtually nothing about cricket and rugby and having taken the minimal science requirements in college, I haven't tried to engage Bryan in any deep

conversations about work and sports. However, he's a bright, compassionate young man whom we have learned to love.

I have written before about our son David. In 1983, he was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. Fortunately, David's tumor was treatable, but the lesion, the surgeries, and the radiation treatments have left David unable to function in certain areas. David lives with Diane and me, and each day we come to appreciate his kindness, his sensitivity, and his love for sports, which he shares with his dad.

Diane, to whom this book is dedicated, is more than a wife or a spouse. I'm a better person just for having known her. Across the years of marriage, my love for all that she is has grown. In every way, Diane has encouraged me to use whatever gifts for preaching and ministry I may have.

I've already said "finally," but the letter to the Philippians has two of them, so I'm in good company. Thanks to those who read this book. I pray for all of us, that our days are rich with a sense of God's presence.

A Word from a Fragile Servant



Forty-three years ago I preached my first sermon. My listeners through the years have varied widely. Some of my first sermons were spoken to men in a rescue mission and to prisoners, where the only sound I remember was the prison door slamming locked behind me. I've spoken to young people at rallies and to college students in chapel. I continue to preach periodically at nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

In fact, one of my fondest recollections was speaking at a one-night revival at the Eastern Star Nursing Home in Louisville, Kentucky. I was teaching at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A young woman in one of my preaching classes was compassionate and caring in addition to being a gifted preacher. She served as chaplain at the Eastern Star Home. "Would you preach a Saturday night revival for us?" she asked me one day after class. "The women want to have a revival service. They want to sing some of the old, familiar songs. They want to remember when they were younger and revival meetings were the times when people were refreshed and renewed. The women will be dressed in the best clothes they have," my student said. And they were! What a night to remember—not so much for what I said, but for what they said by their presence and shared through their recollections.

I still laugh when I remember the white-haired woman in the blue silk dress and matching hat who told me how much she liked my preaching. During the service, she sat near the front, and I noticed she slept soundly through the whole sermon. "You're a good preacher," she said as she left, and I simply thanked her. Those of us who preach have learned to accept compliments whenever, wherever, and however we get them.

Thus, in the years since I first felt the divine nudge to preach, I have spoken to people in different places who exhibit different degrees of

alertness. However, most of my preaching has been in the context of a church. Some of these churches have called me to be their pastor. What a wonderful and overwhelming experience. As a pastor and preacher, you live into the lives of others, and their lives live into yours. You know their stories, and they know your stories. As a pastor, you realize that Augustine, the early church father, was right when he said the most critical component in “sacred rhetoric” was the “ethos” of the speaker. People in the church come to know our character. While the congregation hopefully listens to our *words*, they really listen more to *us*. Only the truly neurotic listeners demand perfection from their pastors. However, the folks in the church have every right to expect that their minister is ethical, caring, and prepared, and to trust that the message the preacher shares is also critical to their own lives. How sad to see a church that distrusts its minister. Eloquence is no substitute for ethics. Words well spoken are undermined by a life poorly lived.

Sometimes, I have preached as the “interim pastor.” As a little boy reminded me, that’s like being the preacher until the church can get a “real preacher.” While you’re not the real preacher, you still care about the people and want to speak in healing and helpful ways. Why did the former pastor leave? What was the pastor’s relationship with the congregation? Is the church glad he or she is gone? Are the people sad? Are some of the congregations glad, some sad, and some angry about what may have been said or done to provoke the minister’s leaving? How does the church feel about itself? Like individuals, churches have images of who they are. Some congregations may see themselves as divided, troubled, and unworthy of a really capable minister. As a seminary professor, I have served different kinds of congregations during the time between the leaving of one pastor and the calling of another. While each situation differs, I find that many churches need a better self-image. It’s not that they resist doing what a church should do. Like some of us at times, the self-image of the congregation is so low that whatever energy the church has is spent trying to survive. One of the best gifts any minister can give a church is to call it back to remember its identity as the children of God and to become more empowered in the process.

I have preached as a pastor. I have spoken as the interim pastor. I also find myself doing quick excursions into various churches. These times of proclamation go by different names. Sometimes, a church wants a series of revival or renewal services. Often, these times of preaching are tied to particular seasons of the Christian year. In my religious tradition, more churches are recognizing the necessity of preparing their members for the experience

of the pivotal days in the life of faith. For many years, most Baptist churches shied away from spiritual preparation for times like Christmas and Easter. Now, it's not uncommon to find congregations that take seriously the seasons of Advent and Lent as periods of preparation for the observance of the critical days of Christmas and Easter.

Obviously, these short trips into the life of a church present unique challenges for preaching. As a preacher, you don't have a relationship with the congregation. Most of the listeners don't know you except through a few facts on a résumé, and while we as preachers may try to get as much information as we can about the church, we really don't have a personal relationship with them. The distance between the speaker and the hearer is large. We haven't had a chance to know and to be known, to listen and to share those stories that have shaped us.

Interestingly, this type of preaching serves to remind me of something I am prone to forget. In the final analysis, effective proclamation is a mysterious transaction. It's mysterious in the sense that people's lives are changed not by the clever adjustments or relational skills of the speaker, but by the God who knows us all and in whose name we come together. In many ways, this recognition that the effects of preaching reside in the God who gives life to our words has freed me from anxiety.

Still, I want to know as much about the congregation as I can. When I preach, I want to project a sense of my caring for the church and empathy for the common burdens that we bear. At the same time, the recognition that God works in the words of the stranger frees me from the compulsion to do too much in too short a time. This compulsion may tempt a preacher to turn into a pseudo-entertainer. Maybe I'll tell them a few jokes to warm up the crowd. Then I'll tell the folks how glad I am to be there. Of course, I have to talk about the church's pastor and how blessed the congregation is to have him or her. What's really going on in this kind of endless introduction? Understand that I'm not saying a few kind words aren't appropriate. I am the church's guest. I am glad to be there. Most of the time, I like the pastor and want to affirm his or her ministry. However, when this kind of "getting to know you" goes on incessantly, it becomes counter-productive. Unintentionally, it communicates that the congregation won't hear the words of the sermon unless the guest minister ingratiates himself or herself to the listeners. What we do as preachers is assume that people won't listen to what we say unless they know us and presumably like us.

While being nice, caring, kind, and gracious are admirable virtues, this kind of meandering preamble indicates that the sermon itself has little power apart from those of us who present it. The engaging manner of the preacher becomes more primary than people's being engaged by the Word itself. Perhaps this phenomenon is partially a result of the emphasis ministers have placed on the element of "delight" in preaching. We have taken effective strategies such as storytelling or self-disclosure to extreme limits. Instead of story or disclosure serving the interest of the message, they become devices to make the preacher more likeable or more known to the listeners.

I share this because I know that one of my strong desires as a preaching minister is to be liked and affirmed. While I certainly want to say something meaningful, I also want to say it in such a way that the listeners will think I am an effective communicator. While the desire to be well received by others is probably part of the make-up of many of us in the ministry, it can also become our undoing. The pastoral ministry itself is an overwhelming vocation. Think of the expectations others have of us and we have of ourselves. Now think of the inevitable distance between the ideal and the reality of what we are and what we can do. Not only do we endure the negative criticism of those who don't believe we measure up, but also, and perhaps more significantly, we are hard on ourselves because we recognize our imperfections.

A student who had been in the pastoral ministry and left because of his frustrations shared his pain with a group of fellow ministers. This minister had entered his first pastorate with the best intentions. A few years later he left the church vowing never to return as a pastor. In retrospect, he understood that he had brought some of the criticism on himself. As the church situation deteriorated, he became less motivated to prepare sermons or to fulfill his parish responsibilities. Anxiety and depression became his constant companions, and he talked movingly about the distance he felt between what the church represented and himself. At the moment when he needed the resources of his faith, he experienced the aloneness that comes when we feel uncertain or unloved by God.

To his credit, this insightful minister didn't blame all of the problems on the church. He knew he had made mistakes. He understood that he had said things that probably should not have been said. He acknowledged that at some point he had lost his focus and was looking for some acceptable reason to leave the church. At the same time, those of us who listened to him understood that he wasn't solely to blame. The church had not been clear

about its expectations of him as a pastor. Several influential people who didn't care for his laid-back style as a person and his low-keyed way of preaching made their opinions widely known. Unfortunately, as so often happens, no one made attempts to effect reconciliation or to make the separation as gentle as possible. The result was a messy divorce. He was hurt, and I believe that the church was also wounded because it didn't face some of its own issues.

However, what struck me most in my conversation with this student was how he described the image of himself as a minister. He had left the seminary as many of us do: filled with enthusiasm, he was going to be the fearless prophet calling the church to mission. At the same time, he would be the faithful pastor walking with parishioners through the broken places of their lives. "I saw myself," the student said, "as a change agent."

At that moment, I became less a teacher and more a fellow traveler. That is precisely how I had seen myself for much of my own pastoral ministry. When I left the seminary, I wanted to help the church. I wanted to be the best pastor I could. In a word, I loved the church. However, that love was mixed with my own fear. What if I failed? What if I threw away all those years I had invested in education and wound up selling life insurance?

Well, the good news is that I'm not in the life insurance business. Filled with love and fear, I have stayed with the church, and most of all, churches have stayed with me. At one level, I believe most of my ministry has been a success. As a pastor in our denominational system, I rose through the ranks, continuing to go to larger churches, which, right or wrong, is often regarded as a measure of success. My preaching seemed to be well received, and my generally extroverted personality helped me relate to a wide variety of people. Since I'm well organized, I was able to do the administrative tasks of the church and to budget my time among the required tasks of a pastor. Perhaps, most importantly, I have a wonderfully supportive family. My children seldom complained about any expectations of them, and the churches where I served were thoughtful not to place unnecessary burdens on them. My wife, Diane, has been a wonderful colleague and companion. She is an extraordinarily compassionate individual who found her place in each church and who never felt constrained to play a "role." Diane has always had the wonderful ability to be comfortable with herself and to be loved by others for the considerate, caring person that she is.

But back to the younger minister's comment that triggered so much anxiety in me. "I left seminary," he said, "with the idea of being a 'change

agent.” So did I! I look back at the whole stretch of my life and see that for as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted to “prove myself” and live up to my own perfectionistic expectations. Perhaps some of this stems from my own nurturing as a child. Someone has astutely observed that children are keen observers but poor interpreters of what they see. Although intelligent, neither of my parents finished high school. My dad became a mid-level manager at Pan American Airways in Miami. My mother stayed at home until I was older, when she began to work as a cashier in a department store.

I was born in December 1942, almost six years after they were married. I was their only child until my brother was born eight years later. My earliest childhood memories are sketchy. We moved several times within the city of Miami. That meant new schools, new neighbors, and new people to introduce myself to as Chuck Bugg. I dreaded the first day in a new school. When the teacher asked us to introduce ourselves, and I said “Bugg,” you can imagine the laughter. I wish I had a quarter for every time somebody asked me, “Does anybody bug you about your name?”

However, what stands out most in my memory as a child is my dad’s drinking problem. I knew nothing about the dynamics of alcoholism. All I knew was that my dad would often arrive home late from work, and when he came home, his speech was slurred, and he staggered as he walked. As I got older, I wondered if the neighbors knew the secret that we never talked about in our house. While my father never physically abused us, I remember a growing sense of shame about our family’s secret. I also recall deep anxiety about how my father would act. When he was sober, he was a good and kind person. When he was drinking, however, he acted in bizarre ways. For example, when I was about nine or ten years old, he became convinced that a burglar was in our house. He awakened the rest of the family early in the morning. Holding a baseball bat, he led us room by room through the house looking for the burglar. At the time, I recall thinking, “This is absolutely idiotic. Nobody has broken into our house.” By the way, we never found the intruder and never found evidence that anyone other than our family was awake at that ungodly hour of the morning.

When I was twelve years old, my father stopped drinking largely through the efforts of people from Alcoholics Anonymous. The local Baptist church became the center of our family’s life, and we thrived among people whose names I remember, such as Bob Payne, and others whom I knew only as “Brother Baker” and “Sister Miller.” Whoever all these folks at West Flagler Park Church were, they loved me and encouraged me to develop the

gifts I had. While this church was far from perfect, the folks helped me to see what a group of people called church could mean to somebody. They loved my family and me into a vibrant faith in the God of Jesus Christ and gave me an everlasting appreciation for the church.

While this church helped give me a new perspective on life and a new confidence for life, they couldn't possibly eliminate some of the effects of my earliest childhood experiences. What has stayed with me the most has been the chaos I perceived and how little I could do to control the world around me. My response was to become the "good child." I did well in school, was elected by my peers to positions of leadership, and at least for a time thought I was a good athlete. Even in elementary school, I regulated my schedule so that my homework was always done before I went outside to play. Though I dreaded those late afternoons when my dad would come home drinking, I learned how to adapt and knew when it was better to stay out of the way. From my perspective now, I look back to see how my situation affected my ministry and even my preaching.

On the more positive side, I do have compassion and care for people. I did find areas where I could achieve. I am highly organized and have no problems with time management. In preaching, I try to convey empathy with people and approach my sermons with the attitude that we are all in some way "fellow strugglers." Despite the fact that churches can be dysfunctional, I have maintained my deep love for the church and my commitment that through its sermons, hymns, prayers, practices, sacraments, ordinances, and outreach, the church can still be an agent of redemption and reconciliation.

However, the same event in our lives that gives some light also casts its shadow. For most of my life I have struggled with what it means to be loved by God and accepted unconditionally by the Gracious Other. Henri Nouwen wrote so beautifully about being the "beloved" of God. In his own way, Nouwen seemed to write about this love more clearly than he ever came to know it himself. I can identify. Listeners who tell me that I make the grace of God so clear to them probably have never known how many times I have wanted to live more out of my own message.

Preaching as a pastor, this has often resulted in the desire to preach sermons that are well received and to be recognized as an effective communicator. In the words of my student, I have wanted to be a "change agent." I have wanted everything and everybody to be different because of my words. You do recognize the "codependency"? As a pastor, I have

assumed responsibility for others and for myself and have become frustrated when we're not all growing in a straight line to be more Christlike. At a conference, Tom Long, that wonderfully gifted homiletician, reminded us about the church father Augustine and his desire for preaching. Baptizing the work of the Greek philosopher Cicero, Augustine stated that the intent of a sermon was to teach, to delight, and to persuade. Long pointed out that these elements represented an appeal to the mind, heart, and will. Then, as he does so well, Long humorously remarked that the ideal response any preacher could receive after a sermon was, "Your message taught me something; I was moved by it; and I intend to act on what you said." All of us in the room laughed because we had never received the ideal response. However, I was crying on the inside because that's what I've really wanted every time I've preached. I've wanted to be the change agent. I've wanted all of us to be right with God. In effect, I've wanted what Jesus never achieved with his preaching and teaching.

While I still want to be an effective preacher, I'm coming now to try to re-vision myself and my preaching. I've spent much of my life trying to get other people's approval. This hunger for acceptance is never filled. For a moment, there's the "rush" that comes when somebody says a complimentary word. But the vacuum is soon back, and you wait for somebody else to make you feel good about yourself. As a preacher, this creates enormous personal anxiety and has the potential for turning preaching into a manipulative exercise designed to get the appropriate response.

Now I'm trying to see preaching not as a way to get something but rather a way to give something to God and to others. We want to give our best, but our best may simply be what we are able to give most sincerely and authentically. My wife has taught me much about gifts. Recently, I passed a kiosk at a shopping mall. The vendor was selling crafts. I bought one that said, "I Love You!" It cost me all of \$2.49 plus tax. When I gave it to Diane, I was amazed at her response. "This is better than a \$3,000 diamond ring because you thought about me." I'm not going to argue the point. My marital stock jumped considerably because of \$2.49 plus tax. I'm certainly not the most thoughtful husband in the world, but I did buy that craft because I love Diane, and I was sincere. I wanted to give her something!

What if we saw preaching this way? We are pastors. We have much to do. However, we love the people to whom we speak because for all their and our idiosyncrasies, we are children of a loving God. We are not preaching to get them to like us or even for them to be conformed to the image we have

of what they should be. We know words are powerful, but we trust any changes that happen to the God who changes us if we are open. We are not change agents. We are lovers, givers, people who bring our offering of the sermon and let God have God's way with our words. We are servants. Who knows what will happen? What we know is that we are not in control.