Pastoral and Evangelical Applications (Chapter 9 from The Human Reflex)

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Pastoral and Evangelistic Applications

Chapter 8 discussed the use of positive reinforcement in Christian education, and showed that biblical teachings both illustrate and encourage the use of techniques that may be technically described as positive reinforcement in fostering religious education and the development of biblically prescribed behavior. This chapter discusses ways in which the same behavioral principles may be used in pastoral and evangelistic applications.

The following words from Romans give expression to the biblical meaning of a pastor’s calling:

Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!" However, they did not all heed the glad tidings; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.¹

For the purposes of this discussion, "pastoral" is defined as providing spiritual care and guidance to a congregation. Broadly, the duties of a minister or priest fall within the scope of this definition. Such ministerial duties as preaching, visitation, and counseling, as well as the more informal interactions between minister or priest and members of the congregation or parish, may thus be included within the scope of pastoral care.

This chapter will first examine some of the ways in which the Apostle Paul used behavioral techniques. Next, it will consider some ways in which behavioral principles can be applied in preaching and pulpit ministry. A third section will examine ways
Pastoral and Evangelistic Applications

in which behavioral principles can be applied in evangelism. Finally, it will address pastoral applications of behavioral approaches in aspects of the ministry other than preaching and evangelism. It should be remembered that many of the approaches presented here are not new. But the examination of a behavioral approach may be of value in two ways. First, by drawing attention to relevant principles, existing practices may be better understood, carried out more consistently, and thus made more effective. Second, examination of existing practices may suggest ways in which they may be improved, or lead to the development of new and more effective approaches.

Behavioral Techniques and the Apostle Paul

A number of biblical examples from the life of Paul and his writings indicate that he employed several behavioral practices in his ministry. Paul’s letters to the churches are filled with examples of praise for those aspects of their Christian life in which they are doing well, and reproof and exhortation directed toward areas of failure. Conceptually, these may be seen as examples of positive reinforcement and punishment from a behavioral perspective.

Numerous examples of praise are found throughout Paul’s letters. To the Colossians, he writes: “We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints...” Similarly, Paul writes to the Philippians: “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you... because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me.” Later, Paul says: “But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly... [that you] sent a gift more than once for my needs.”

Corinthians includes several examples of Paul’s critical or punishing remarks: “Now I exhort you, brethren... that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you... for I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you.” Later, Paul says: “Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. For the
The kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness?  

The last quote suggests that Paul used corrective techniques that function as punishment not only in his writing, but also in his direct dealings with the people in his churches.

Another area in Paul’s ministry that illustrates behavioral practices is his emphasis on modeling and imitation. Paul repeatedly instructs those in the churches to “be imitators of me.” Similarly, Paul points to Jesus as a model who is to be imitated in various respects. Perhaps the centrality of these emphases is captured most clearly in the instruction to the church at Corinth: “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.”

Preaching and Pulpit Ministry

The behavioral view has a number of implications for preaching. One way in which the pulpit ministry may be made more effective is through emphasis on practical applications of biblical teachings about possible courses of everyday action and their consequences. Frequently, preaching tends to focus on the Bible as a kind of history book rather than as a guide to daily living in modern society. This takes the form of discussion of what Paul did, what Jesus said, and so on, while neglecting the practical implications of biblical teachings.

For example, in teaching about marriage, it is common to discuss what Jesus said about marriage, or what Paul said about the relationship of husband and wife, but to say little about how these teachings will be worked out in the daily lives of members of the congregation. One way in which such practical application could be made is through specifying behavioral alternatives and showing whether they are consistent or inconsistent with the teaching, “... Wives, be subject to your own husbands.” Similarly, one could develop behavioral alternatives that are consistent and inconsistent with the instruction, “Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church...”

In addition to identifying behavioral alternatives and relating them to biblical prescriptions and prohibitions, preaching can also address the question of the consequences that are likely to follow.
engaging in each of the various behavioral alternatives. Perhaps an ideal way to do so would be to introduce various biblical teachings that focus directly on some of the problems (punishments) that follow failure to heed biblical teachings about the marital relationship, as well as the blessings (positive reinforcements) that will follow obedience. Some examples include: (1) “Can two walk together unless they agree?”,\(^1\) (2) open rebuke is better than hidden love;\(^2\) (3) it is better to live alone than with a quarrelsome wife;\(^3\) (4) hearing and heeding reproof prevents quarrels;\(^4\) (5) an unloving relationship with his wife will interfere with getting what a man seeks from God;\(^5\) and (6) a proud attitude and closed mind toward suggestions leads to ruin, but good counsel ensures success.\(^6\)

Many other biblical principles may be found to suggest clear behavioral consequences for acting in certain ways. By focusing the pulpit ministry on this kind of teaching, the pastor or priest may enhance the probability that it will have a behavioral impact on the audience.

A third manner in which the effectiveness of the pulpit ministry could be enhanced is by concentrating on the same issues in both pulpit ministry and other aspects of the pastoral ministry. For example, preaching about spiritual gifts could be conducted at the same time that practical teaching on the exercise of spiritual gifts is ongoing in other parts of the pastoral ministry.

A final emphasis, and one that is of great potential significance, is the behavioral suggestion of the importance of individualized instruction. The difficulties inherent in attempting to preach a sermon that speaks to the individual needs of each person in the audience are nearly insurmountable. Modern technology has provided a number of alternatives through the use of tape recordings; it is now possible for people to listen to tapes that speak to their immediate needs. Similarly, the easy availability of printed materials offers additional access to individualized instruction.

The preaching ministry has the potential for serving an important function in the life of the church, especially in the area of providing encouragement and motivation. Thus these remarks are intended to illustrate ways in which the pulpit ministry can be made more effective, and to suggest alternative modes of ministering.\(^7\)
**Evangelistic Applications**

In the area of evangelism, as in all areas of religious ministry, it is important to remember that the active ministry and work of the Holy Spirit is vital. Our comments here take this for granted. It should also be remembered that God normally works through natural means to accomplish his purposes in our world. Our discussion here presumes this view, and emphasizes the human means through which God works, since those are the arenas in which people play an active role in the ministry of evangelism. Thus we see that “God was well-pleased through... the message preached to save those who believe,”18 and that “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”19

*Evangelism is a social influence process in which various approaches are employed, with the objective of influencing an individual to make a commitment to the Christ of Scripture.* In recent years, this commitment has come to be referred to popularly as being “born again.” Evangelism thus involves the use of social influence to get a person to explore and then adopt a new worldview. Clearly, the goal of commitment to God through Jesus Christ has extensive biblical support; with the Bible as our guideline for values, we can embrace the use of social influence to persuade people to make such a commitment. However, the means employed in seeking to achieve this goal also need to be scrutinized to see whether they measure up to biblical standards.

Broadly, the method of evangelism presented in the scripture is that of preaching the good news of salvation.20 While this is a basic in terms of content, there appears to be room for considerable latitude in the way in which the message is to be presented. For example, in one context it is suggested that others may be won to Christ, without a word, by the behavior of a Christian.21 Similarly, we are told that Jesus’ disciples will be recognized by their manifestation of love to each other.22 Evangelism, then, involves preaching the good news as a central element, but also involves such aspects of our lives as our behavior in relationship to others in general, and to the one to whom the preaching is directed in particular.

Although the evangelistic method of approaching a person selected in a random manner, or by going from house to house, is still practiced and is sometimes effective, alternative modes of evang-
ism have been developed that reflect relationship issues and make use of the processes of social influence discussed above. Examples of these latter types of evangelism include the “evangelism explosion” approach, “relationship evangelism,” and “worldview evangelism.”

In an interesting discussion of evangelism, psychologists Kenneth Mathiesen and Craig W. Ellison, in agreement with James Eng­el’s Spiritual Decision Process models, suggest that openness to making a Christian commitment may be thought of as a continuum. People at the far end of the continuum are not ready to make a profession of faith; evangelistic efforts must be directed at moving them to the adjacent point on the continuum rather than toward the ultimate decision. At the other end of the continuum are those who have already made a commitment to God and are progressing in their relationship to him. Many of the points to be made here can be related to Engel’s conceptualization.

The concept of shaping was briefly mentioned in Chapter 2. Basically, shaping involves reinforcing a given response that already exists at some strength, and is most like the goal response of any that the organism currently performs. Reinforcement is initially provided for this response, but the precise performance required for reinforcement is gradually changed along a continuum until eventually the desired response is the only one reinforced. For example, teaching a pigeon to stand on its left foot can be shaped by first reinforcing the pigeon each time the right foot is lifted; initially, this may occur only when walking. Gradually, we would require the right foot to be held up for longer and longer periods of time, until eventually the pigeon is standing on the left foot and holding up the right.

Evangelism may be approached in an analogous fashion. Since different people are at different points along the continuum at the first contact, the first challenge is to discover where the person is. Evangelism, then, may be conceived of as making efforts to influence people to shift viewpoints along the continuum until they are ready for, and actually make, a commitment to God. A brief look at three different evangelistic methods illustrates how behavioral techniques may be incorporated into achieving this goal.

The Evangelism explosion approach selects people who have attended a particular church. In general, such individuals will be
somewhere in the middle of the continuum, or possibly further toward the goal of commitment to God. The behavior of attending church, in itself, indicates at minimum some openness to a Christian worldview. Thus such persons are prime prospects for making the final step or two of moving into a commitment to God.

In relationship evangelism, the first step is to get acquainted with the person. Once a relationship develops, and the person becomes open to hearing the evangelist’s point of view, it becomes possible to present a viewpoint that may be a bit different from their own, to challenge them to consider it, and perhaps to influence change. From a behavioral viewpoint, this can be conceptualized as a process in which the evangelist comes to be an important social reinforcer for the prospective convert. The biblical concept of love for my neighbor, for example, may be shown to imply doing those things in relationship with them that are likely to establish me as a social reinforcer. Having accomplished this, I can then be much more effective in social influence, and hence more effective in evangelism.

Finally, worldview evangelism connotes the process of first raising doubts about the credibility of an alternative worldview, then encouraging the person to consider the biblical, theistic worldview. In terms of Ellison’s formulation, the person is moved from the extreme of strong commitment to a particular worldview, to a point where they can see flaws in the view they previously held, and thus become open to consider a biblical alternative.

One additional observation may be helpful. Although the Bible clearly teaches the need for an individual commitment in relationship to God, it also suggests that there is a tendency for this commitment to run in families. The social influence processes that we have described here—to the extent that they operate effectively in the family setting—are likely to result in the children of Christian parents being more open to a Christian commitment than children of non-Christian parents. In terms of Ellison’s continuum, children of Christian parents grow up with a worldview that is very similar to the Christian view; they are close to the point on the continuum of making a choice for Christ. By contrast, children who grow up in non-Christian homes are likely to be far from such a viewpoint, to be distant on Engel’s continuum.
PASTORAL APPLICATIONS

A typical pastor or priest has many duties and responsibilities associated with the office. These range from administration of the congregation and the pulpit preaching ministry to conducting funerals, visiting the sick and bereaved, making routine calls on members, teaching, counseling, and less formal types of interactions.

The notion of the full-time, salaried, professional minister is not inconsistent with biblical teaching, but certainly is not a biblical emphasis. Rather, the biblical perspective is that each individual believer is given the ability and responsibility to be actively involved in ministry. A major duty of the pastor often becomes that of finding ways to get members of his congregation involved in active ministry. The way a minister conducts his duties can have a profound influence on his congregation.

THE PASTOR AS MODEL

One of the most effective social influence processes is that of modeling and imitation. While there has been a tendency to view the principal pastoral duty as the pulpit ministry, behavioral findings that emphasize the central role of reinforced practice in learning suggest that preaching is likely to have limited influence on daily behavior. Thus one of the most basic implications of a behavioral approach for pastoral functioning is the suggestion that greater emphasis be placed on the pastor as model and less emphasis on the pastor as preacher.

There are a number of ways in which modeling may be used effectively in the pastoral ministry. The first involves the pastor himself as a model. For example, the pastor may invite another member to accompany him as he performs various duties. An elder might be invited to come along on hospital visits as an observer. Over time, the pastor can encourage the elder to take a greater role in the interactions with the person who is visited. Eventually, the pastor may request the elder to make a call alone at a time when it is inconvenient for the pastor to go. In this way, through observing the pastor, imitating some of the ways in which the pastor interacts with the sick, and through the pastor's encourage-
ment, another member of the church who has appropriate gifts may be trained to assist in this aspect of the ministry. The same approach may be taken in other areas of ministry in which the pastor is involved.

It is possible that there are a number of areas of ministry in the church in which the pastor is not directly involved. In these areas, the pastor may encourage members who minister effectively to train new members through the same approach we have just discussed for the pastor. For example, Mary was known in her church for her ability to help with all the practical problems of child care, meals, laundry, and so on, which are required when a family member is hospitalized. As her church grew, however, the task became too great for Mary to handle alone. Her pastor encouraged her to select one or two other women who could assist her. Mary knew that she could count on June, and thought that Evelyn might be able to help as well. Over a period of several months, Mary gradually began to call on these two to assist her more and more frequently. Eventually she was confident that June could do the task as well as Mary herself, and Evelyn had become a dependable assistant.

Other possibilities for application of modeling and imitation in the pastoral role are numerous. Attention may be drawn to other members of the congregation as models of desired behaviors through the use of testimonies and reports. Discipleship groups may be established to foster contact among members, so that they may observe each other's manner of living and coping with various daily experiences such as disappointment, loss of a job, grief, finances, and so on. While it is possible in such contexts to observe undesirable as well as desirable ways to handle such experiences, drawing attention to the consequences of the performances and praising good models will result in a tendency for their performances to be imitated. 25

Another principle to remember is that exposure to several models, each of whom demonstrates similar performances in a given setting, is more likely to be effective in establishing a desired performance than is exposure to a single model. 26 Observing a single person who manages her finances without credit is likely to have limited impact in a society in which use of credit is widespread.
However, exposure to a group of persons, each of whom live in this way, may significantly alter the way one manages one's own financial affairs.

From a biblical perspective, there is much that would support the use of modeling in pastoral ministry. As a part of his early ministry, Jesus selected a group of disciples: "And He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach."27 After spending time with Jesus, apparently to observe the manner of his ministry (he was a model), Jesus sent them out two by two to minister on their own.28 In a similar manner, Paul instructs Timothy to teach what he has learned to others.29

In the sections just discussed, imitation is not explicitly suggested, but other biblical passages refer to it more explicitly. Paul repeatedly instructs, "Be followers of me...."30 The word Paul used here is sometimes translated *imitators*, and is the same root word from which we get the word *mimic*; thus Paul is saying "be imitators of me."31 At one point he says: "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ."32 Similarly, we are told that Jesus was our example. In summary, it is a clear biblical teaching that Jesus in particular, and spiritual leaders in general, are examples to be imitated. Numerous other scriptures support this view.33

Although modeling and imitation has a wide range of practical applications in establishing desired performances, some performances are not readily influenced in this way. A second approach that may be used, especially to increase the frequency of behaviors that are present but very weak, is that of seeking a behavioral commitment. For example, Carol and Jack came to their pastor complaining that they no longer loved each other and asking questions about divorce. They seemed convinced that divorce was wrong, but claimed that they saw no hope for their relationship. Some exploration suggested that they had begun to neglect their relationship some time ago; this, coupled with a financial problem, had produced the current crisis. The pastor's first step in dealing with this couple was to ask them to make a commitment not to take divorce action for six weeks, while efforts were made by means of counseling to work on the problems in their relationship. The approach used here is technically referred to as priming. It involves
using a stimulus that controls a desired performance to get it started; later, the goal is to bring the performance under control of more natural stimuli rather than the pastor’s instructions.

**PASTORAL USE OF REINFORCEMENT**

The suggestion of pastoral use of positive reinforcement probably brings to mind, for many, images such as giving hamburgers for attendance at Sunday School. Such approaches may have their place, as suggested in Chapter 8, but they are not our main concern here. Much of human behavior is primarily under control of social reinforcement.

Social attention is a major reinforcing event for most people. The mere fact that others notice and respond to a performance may be enough to maintain it; if the social response is positive, such as praise and admiration, this effect is especially likely. Although our focus in the previous section was on the role of observing a model in developing desired performances, reinforcement for imitation of the model is an important additional element in establishing such performances.

In the example of hospital visitation, the pastor might begin by reinforcing the elder for coming along. Simply saying, "I really appreciate your taking the time to accompany me today; I’d like for us to do this again," should be sufficient. For many people, in fact, the company of the pastor is sufficiently reinforcing in itself. Later, reinforcement may shift to a focus on specific aspects of interaction in the hospital setting; for example, "I really appreciate your reading the Bible to Mrs. Jones tonight." It is important to remember, too, that much of the reinforcement for making such visits will come in a natural way from the person who receives the visit, through expressions of gratitude.

A major limitation of the preaching ministry is that it encourages passive listening. The overwhelming evidence in favor of other approaches as more effective for teaching suggests that reliance on this approach needs to be reduced, and alternative modes of pastoral ministry correspondingly emphasized. Both behaviorally and biblically, the suggestion that the pastor become actively involved in functioning as a model in teaching various forms of ministry to members of the congregation cannot be ignored.
NOTES

2. Col. 1:3-4.
3. Phil. 1:3-7.
4. Phil. 4:10,16.
5. 1 Cor. 1:10-11.
6. 1 Cor. 4:18-21.
7. 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17.
8. 1 Cor. 11:1.
11. Amos 3:3.
12. Prov. 27:5.
15. 1 Pet. 3:7.
18. 1 Cor. 1:21.
26. Ibid.
29. 1 Cor. 4:17.
30. 1 Cor. 4:16 (Authorized Version); see also 1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:7-9.
31. 1 Cor. 4:16 (NASB).
32. 1 Cor. 11:1.
33. E.g., Eph. 5:1-2; Phil. 4:9; Heb. 6:11-12; 1 Pet. 2:21; 4:1.