

Losing My Religion
to Find God

A Secular Grace

Righteousness by
Faith Is Not a Doctrine

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**GOD'S
GRACE**





God's Grace for Pastors

By Loren Seibold

THE FIRST TIME I KNEW I WAS IN OVER MY HEAD WAS when someone addressed me as “Pastor.”

I went on the payroll of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Sept. 15, 1978, and settled with my new wife a few blocks away from a tiny church in Bottineau, North Dakota. I was a college graduate with a BA in religious studies from Walla Walla College. There was nothing about me that would merit my being called “pastor.”

But almost right away, people did. Even before I understood everything that it would mean, it felt to me like a thing too big for me to inhabit.

On June 30 of this year, I retired from ministry. I now feel free to confess that the title “pastor” never felt any more comfortable than it did the first time I heard it. There are clergy who revel in it, who swell up into it, God bless them. As time has passed, I learned to live with it. I wore it for more than 40 years, performing its assigned tasks reasonably well.

But I have never been at ease with it. Even though my hair is now white and I’m somewhat more pastoral-looking than I was then, it still seems pretentious, imposterish. It describes a job that is infinitely consequential, while so undefined as to be utterly impossible.

Perfection and Expectations

A Christian psychologist I know once said that no one ever falls into ministry as they might into, say, selling insurance. Pastors go into ministry in pursuit of something personal, he thought, and all the talk of a “call” is a shortcut around identifying one’s own psychological struggles. Indeed, didn’t Ellen White say that if you “accept the one principle of making the service of God supreme,” you “will find perplexities vanish, and a plain path before [your] feet”?¹ Many a pastor has gone into ministry because it felt like the route to a spiritually integrated life.

There is, of course, no guarantee of that. It didn’t take me long to see, in myself and in my

colleagues, that there is no magic in being a religious professional, no instant perfection of the spirit, and no divinely communicated insider information. I was still grouchy with my wife, occasionally lazy, overflowing with neither courage nor faith. The Lord didn’t talk to me aloud when I prayed, nor did he remove all of my temptations, discouragements, and uncertainties.

So one of the first things I grappled with was the need to accept that I wasn’t a perfect person—or even a perfect believer, if some wanted to imagine that I was. Those who expect perfect behavior and perfect faith from pastors might call this hypocrisy, but imperfection is as endemic to religion as infection is to hospitals: unwelcome, but inevitable. It’s better to be aware of that than to believe that you’re something you’re not.

This raises the question of what people expect of their pastors, which is not altogether clear. Prayers that work better than theirs? Sermons that transform their lives? A kind friend? A perfect example? It seems as if something more, something deeper, haunts this relationship—some sense that the pastor stands in for God. People joke about that to pastors, but in fact, they sort of believe it: that you have a special hotline to God. That your prayers have more clout than theirs. That you don’t have the same problems and temptations that others do.

We pastors cannot live up to this, though we are expected to try. What I would come to see later is that some people, after they’re through loving you for what they expect you to be, may hate you for not being it.

All of which is to say that if you are an honest person who tries to inhabit this role fully, to take yourself completely seriously, you cannot help but feel like an imposter. I would go even further and say that any pastor who doesn’t feel a bit like an imposter is someone you probably shouldn’t completely trust, because he’s insufficiently acquainted with his own shadow side.

Only one thing lets us attempt the job at all: that God’s grace flows in and wraps around us, even when we feel like the rankest imposters playing religious make-believe.

Fixing Things

When I was about 11 years old, our dachshund Pepper ran out on the road and was hit by the tire of the mailman's pickup.

As a child, you expect your parents to fix things. If you're hungry, they provide food. If you fall off your bike, they have bandages. If your tummy hurts, they know what to do. So, as Pepper thrashed about with a broken spine, we children cried and said, "Mommy, Daddy, do something! Make Pepper okay again!"

It was one of the first hard lessons of real life: that all Daddy could do was to put a rifle to Pepper's head and end his suffering.

How often as a pastor I've felt like a parent who couldn't do what needed to be done! How often I longed to do more than simply stand there looking benign and clerical! How

Like the Waters Cover the Sea

It sometimes seems to me that one must be, by definition, a failure at ministry. Not necessarily at running a church, or being charming and helpful, or preaching and teaching effectively, or praying for people, or generally being a good and decent leader. But the deeper things that ministry ought to be—the holy things, the divine power—are as much beyond our reach as they are everyone else's.

Only one thing lets us attempt the job at all: that God's grace fills in around well-intentioned pastors and covers over us—and our charges. God, "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love" (Psalm 103:8, NIV), forgives us for all we are unable to be and cannot do. Such grace flows in and wraps around us in certain moments, even when we aren't aware of it, even

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ineffectual it feels, how helpless! I wished I were a doctor who had medicines or a scalpel, an attorney who could work out the legal problems, a psychologist who could talk the marriage into happiness again.

But often I was the one left after those specialists had come and gone—after all of them had failed: the marriage broken, the child dead, the job lost. And what resources did I show up with to ease these tragedies? A Bible, a text, a prayer, a kind presence, a held hand, and some excuses for why the God who says he's all powerful and loves us supremely didn't miraculously fix something of extraordinary importance in a parishioner's life.

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Calling oneself a pastor seems *ipso facto* arrogant. To stand in for God is a dangerous thing. How many in the Hebrew Bible were punished for regarding too lightly the things of God? Think of Uzzah with the ark, the people of Beth Shemesh, and the sons of Aaron. God appeared to have had little patience with familiarity toward what was holy. We pastors, though, are brash in God's name. So many of us deal so boldly with holy things that we ought to drop dead in the pulpit.

I conclude that we are forgiven and protected by the grace earned at the cross. Just as no one can expect salvation without God's grace, neither can one be a pastor without God's grace.

What Religion Has Done

Someone is going to say: “But, Loren, it wasn’t up to you. You are taking too much upon yourself. This is all up to God.” I reply, *Then why did I need a clerical title, a role, a holy designation?* (Perhaps those people are right who argue that the question of ordination should be solved not by ordaining more people, but by ordaining none of us.)

Let us peer closely for a moment at religion. While we Christians regularly fail in the particular, we aggrandize ourselves in the corporate. Organized religion has made us proud, possessive. We say the church is God’s thing, but we act as though it is ours. With our titles, our degrees, our theologies, our rhetoric, our buildings, and our too many presidents and vice presidents, we are experts at playing church.

There is a triumphalism here that must be called out. When I am in pastors’ meetings or denominational committee meetings, it strikes me how bold we are before God! How we rise up on our hind legs and make claims and promises in God’s name! How we brag with faux humility about our accomplishments and our assets and our programs! We insert prayers between each decision, each agenda item—not because we are reveling in God’s holiness, but to convince ourselves that God is on our side in this! We gather and decide—by vote!—what God thinks, and then we enforce it on 20 million people!

We give God the credit, to be sure—in an offhand way. Thank you for *our* successes, Lord. Thank you that *we* have all this marvelous truth, these hospitals and universities, these extraordinary leaders, these great ideas, all this money, and that *we’re* the highest authority of God on Earth.

No one uses God’s name in vain more than the clergy. What can save arrogant men and women like us but God’s overflowing grace?

My Complaint

For 41 years I watched over my little bit of the world. I prayed for it. I talked to it. Oh, how I talked! I made endless excuses for God. Mostly I tried to explain why, when I encouraged people to bring to God their prayers and petitions (“What a privilege to carry, / everything to God in prayer!”), God answered at best ambiguously—and sometimes (it seemed

to me) not at all. What else could we do but accept it? So we gave God credit for whatever happened; of even the most tragic outcome, we would say, “It was God’s will.” I fear that at times I implied that if faith wasn’t “working,” it was our own fault. We hadn’t tried hard enough, prayed fervently enough, or been faithful enough. (There are many things I used to say that I do not say now.)

This my confession. And now, like Habakkuk, I state my complaint:

For my part, dear Lord, I would have liked to see more miracles. I would have liked to see cancers disappear, legs grow back, dead children come to life, hurricanes reverse course, and wars end, all in response to prayer. According to the Bible, you did such things before. Why not now? How about sending an angel now and then—would that have been so hard? I would even have settled for more hopeless marriages saved, more addictions overcome, and more churches being happy, healing places; I longed for depression to disappear in response to prayer rather than to selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors—these miracles would have been enough.

Instead, we attributed *our* efforts to *you* (clumsily, insincerely), and when we failed, we let you off the hook by saying, “It was God’s will.” Lord, do you see how much more effectively we could have witnessed for you if people had had more than our simplistic explanations for pain and suffering and confusion? It seems to me, just from personal observations in the small space you assigned me, that you left unexplored many opportunities for showing your power and demonstrating your love. I tried my best to do it on your behalf, Lord, but I did it very poorly.

So perhaps we are a pair, Pastor Loren Seibold and God. I need God’s grace and forgiveness—and God needs mine.

At the very least, on the other side, I’m hoping for an explanation. **AT**

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (1898), p. 330.