



You're a Shepherd, Not a Cowboy:
A Round Table Conversation on Simplicity

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Adam Borneman: Hi friends, this is Adam Borneman with the Ministry Collaborative, and I've been looking forward to having a conversation with two really wonderful colleagues and friends: of course, my colleague, Rev. Adam Mixon from our Ministry Collaborative team, and a multiple-time repeat guest, Rev. Sherrad Hayes. Could you both just briefly remind folks of where you are located in life and ministry?

Sherrad Hayes: Hey, yeah. I'm Sherrad Hayes. I'm the pastor of Union Baptist Church, which is just outside of West Point, Georgia, just south of La Grange in rural Harris County, Georgia.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. And this is Adam Mixon. I'm the pastor of the Zion Spring Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. I've been there...last Sunday in April was 25 years.

Adam Borneman: I think about you two and your congregations a lot. And one of those reasons is I'm really drawn to smaller to mid-size congregations in this moment and what they can teach us, especially around simplicity, oftentimes just out of necessity, but the depth that results from that. And I went back to these words from Richard Foster. I've been a fan of Foster's work for quite some time, and he has some good stuff on simplicity. This reminded me of you all in different ways:

"Christian simplicity frees us from this modern mania. It brings sanity to our compulsive extravagance, and peace to our frantic spirit. It liberates us from what William Penn once called 'cumber.' It allows us to see material things for what they are – goods to enhance life, not to oppress life. People once again become more important than possessions. Simplicity enables us to live lives of integrity in the face of the terrible realities of our global village."

How does that strike you?

Adam Mixon: Well, I think for me, it sounds like, number one, it was written yesterday – just timely. And preachers, pastors who are trying to be faithful right now are under incredible pressure to produce, to plan, to create. I think the reminder is that we don't react to, but we respond based on the hope that we have in the Gospel of Jesus. It's different. It's a different way of orienting ourselves, which for some who are outside, it looks slow, and sometimes it looks like we're not being responsive, or somehow we're irrelevant. But in reality, we are being absolutely faithful and protesting against all of that stuff that will have us give into the worry and the anxiety and the fear and the hopelessness that's kind of just tearing away at people's lives. It's deliberate. It's a deliberate stance to not be pressed by all of those things into a place of reaction.

Sherrad: Yeah. I think about the simplicity of grace – both God's provision of grace, his provision of accomplishing all that is required already, and still the call to act within that. So, it's a passive grace, but doesn't lead to passivity. And it's a beautiful thing, but it's a thing that requires us to stop and look around and pay attention at the ways that God is giving us grace in the day-to-day. And it's so countercultural, because we have such a pressure to produce constantly, and our attention is drawn to whatever is immediate, and we get confused between what's immediate and what's urgent.

And I think one of the beautiful privileges of being a pastor and living intentionally in that kind of grace is that we can act as countercultural agents of that. It's like, we can go at a different pace, I think – when we understand our roles rightly, that is. We can go at a different pace, and that provides a sense of calm for everyone else; not because we're the source of the calm, but because we can point to the one who provides grace daily.

Adam Mixon: Man, that is so timely again, because of the season that we're in. Matter of fact, this past week I preached about the command to wait and how, as Jesus ascends, his instructions to the disciples are not necessarily the "go", but it is the "wait". Again, that flips things on its head. He says, "Wait and you will receive." Not "go and produce". He says, "Wait, and you will receive power to be, and you will be my witnesses." It's...it's different. And I actually find encouragement in that, because my inbox now is just spammed with all kind of political messaging about what's going on, and how I need to be reacting to those things, and using my pulpit to respond to those things. And I appreciate the sentiment behind them, but I don't accept that pressure.

My social location, serving a Black Baptist church in the middle of Birmingham, Alabama – we live this. This is who we are. This is woven in to how we survive. So, I don't need your additional pressure. I don't need a hand at my back saying, "If I'm not preaching X, Y, and Z on this Sunday, then somehow I'm not being faithful, or doing right by the..." I push back against that completely. I think, more so now than ever, people need a calm assurance. They don't need to give into despair and hopelessness of our circumstance, because this is going to be a long...I mean, it has been already. This is a long game, a long fight. And the only way you cultivate that patience and resilience is by being anchored in something other than "the cause" – again, the resurrection.

Sherrad: Absolutely.

Adam Borneman: That makes me really curious about, Sherrad, in your context – a rural, Protestant, deeply rooted context. How are these things, to use Adam's words, how is patience, simplicity, things of that nature, woven into the life of the congregation – some in natural ways, but also in ways that are attempting to exhibit faithfulness?

Sherrad: Yeah. I think the main thing I would say to that is that transformation is a long game. It's like, you're not going to get someone to immediately change their mind about something, and it's not even going to be really authentic, unless it comes from a restructuring of the foundation. And the foundation has to be built on Christ, and Christ crucified.

I love how Adam brought up the Ascension, and the time in between, you know, the Ascension and Pentecost, and the importance of waiting. Ascension is one of my favorite days of the church calendar, and it gets overlooked. In real time, we're recording this on a Monday. Ascension Day was last Thursday. I preached on 2 John – another overlooked, kind of, book – and was just drawn to how John talks about the folks who were opposing his ministry work, and that they were ones who were wanting to kind of run ahead: that anyone who runs ahead and is not continuing the teaching of Christ does not have God. And so, it's this constant desire to get past these elemental teachings of Christ who, necessarily, if you preach Christ and him crucified, you have to preach him bringing down the dividing wall of hostility. And that kind of transformational work undergirds everything else that you're going to have to do for the rest of your life in every sphere of life.

And so, when we talk about preaching and preaching politically...when I sat down with the deacons (I didn't know this was an interview at the time, but it became an interview quite quickly) and it was like, you know, "Do you preach politics from the pulpit?"

And I was like, "Yes, every Sunday. But I'm not partisan. Like, what I do is I preach King Jesus. And that is a political statement. To say 'Jesus is Lord and not Caesar' is a political statement." And so, you know, I preach the kingdom of heaven. And that's going to transform us and the way we see our neighbor, really. We have to see the person next to us as Christ sees them. And the only way to do that is through the long, steady, simple proclamation of Christ crucified, risen, telling the disciples to wait and receive the Holy Spirit. It's a spiritual transformation, and it has to go to the core of who we are. And that manifests itself in tangible ways – not dismissing that at all, but it has to get at the core of who we are, has to get the core of who we say we are; our identity.

Adam Mixon: Yeah. It makes you wonder, again, whether or not some of us are struggling with whether or not we actually believe that we are workers and we are productive to some extent, but are we witnesses? Because witnesses tell about their encounter, their experience. Again, the pressure is so great to, again, become reactive, and we become crisis managers, or whatever. And my mind goes back to when my pastor installed me at the church where I've been serving the last 25 years. He reminded me that shepherding is not fast work. "You are a shepherd." He said it like this. He said, "You're a shepherd, not a cowboy." Cowboys drive hard and fast, rough in the saddle. That is not shepherding work. That's not shepherding work. It's slow. It's deliberate. It's over time. Again, it's not the work of the itinerant who gets to pop in and drop the bomb and leave. It's a different work.

Adam Borneman: I want to pull on this thread a little bit, because I think this is what you two are getting at, is that" it is a matter of pace. The choice between passivity and activity is, in some sense, a false choice. It reminds me of Psalm 127: "Unless the Lord builds it, the laborers labor in vain." And so, it seems to me that in both of your contexts – and really anywhere – so much of our discernment needs to be about what is God doing that we need to participate in, but also, at what pace is God doing it?

Sherrad, I love the reference to 2 John. That's not one that would've been right in front of me and available, but it's so true: this very understandable human need to run ahead, to rush ahead. There are moments where there is that statement of why we can't wait, but I'm putting that in the context of a deeper discernment that most of our congregations need to undertake.

Sherrad: Yeah. I think a lot of it comes down to being responsive to the Spirit, and a willingness to not go in the direction that I had planned out. I wish I could take credit for knowing, you know, the Bible so well that I pulled 2 John 9 just out of nowhere, but, no, it was: I want to go through these letters over the year, preach John, thought I was just going to do 1 John, and it's like, "No, preach all of them." And it just so happened to line up with Ascension Sunday.

And so, I wish I could say that I planned it out, but it's really just simple, little...And it's not like a voice from heaven telling me do this, but it's just simple, little, "No, just go ahead and preach the rest of them and plan it out," not knowing how it's going to align. And I think the important thing in that kind of context is being willing to hear the Spirit – not just in quiet personal devotion, but through your brothers and sisters who are placed in your ministry context. The prerequisite for that is that you're face to face with them regularly throughout the week.

And so, these kind of things, tying together with the understanding that, I don't know what the end goal might be, but I can trust that God does, and that God is the one who is weaving these interactions, weaving even our own planning, weaving each moment that he gives me in the privilege of being a pastor. God is weaving those things together and making something, and I don't have to bear the burden of making it.

Adam Borneman: How do y'all help your people avoid all of the noise that gets in the way of what Sherrad just described?

Adam Mixon: To that end, I think you said the word "responsive" versus being "reactive". And there is plenty of noise. There's plenty that would try to vie for our attention or whatever. But thinking about the faithfulness that accompanies waiting...and Jesus does this over and over again throughout the gospels, where he doesn't seem in a hurry. Somebody's sick, or something's going on, or there's a storm, and Jesus is kind of like, "Eh." There's this lack of urgency.

And it's like, "Well, why is Jesus acting like that? Why isn't he responding to our anxiety? What is going on there?" And the conclusion I've come to is that Jesus doesn't respond to our urgency with more anxiety or reactivity, because there is a confidence. He knows the will of the Father, so he doesn't have to get in a hurry proving anything.

I mean, I hate to, like, swat it down like that and be like, "God is sovereign." In my tradition, that's our refrain. I mean, we've been catching hell for a couple centuries (more than that). The refrain is hope in God: that God is sovereign, that God sees, knows and cares, and that God will work things out for our good, and for our perfecting that. And sometimes, that's across generations, over and over again. That's how we've survived, and not just given ourselves over to complete bitterness and hatefulness and destructiveness. It's because we keep coming back, reorienting toward this hope that we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, this living hope that we have in the resurrection. That's a different way. It doesn't mean we don't respond to what's going on in our context, but our response comes from a different place. It's not the cause that drives us. It's our identity that's rooted in the hope that we have in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is our being that informs our doing, and not the other way around. For me, that means I don't receive that pressure to have to respond to every pundit that's on the news, or every political ad that comes up. I don't have to react to that, because we know who we are, and we know that what that is does not align with who we are. Then there's this luxury that I have. Sometimes my existence is a protest. We're inundated with this stuff. Folks need a break from that. They need to be reminded of who they are, and who they belong to, and who's ultimately in control, and who is ever at work on our behalf.

Adam Borneman: Sherrad, what is your word to pastors and lay leaders in this moment around simplicity or patience?

Sherrad: Well, I think Adam said it all in many ways. But what resonated with me immediately is confidence, and where does your confidence come from? And I was even thinking about it just in a deeply personal way. Again, we're recording this on a Monday, which is notoriously probably the worst time to get a preacher on, because your confidence is not necessarily going to be very high. But then it kind of goes to the underlying basis of, what is my confidence? It's not that I have anything novel or eloquent or great to say, other than pointing to and being a witness to Jesus Christ and what Jesus Christ has done. And so, to the point where I can communicate that, I can trust that Jesus and the Holy Spirit

are going to act in ways that are far beyond my own capability. And I have to rest my confidence in that. Because if I don't, then that's just going to lead me further down the path of depression, and that's not helpful for anybody. So, place your confidence in Jesus, and don't try to run too far ahead.