

# Interview R. Kent Hughes

by Art Azurdia



*R. Kent Hughes has been engaged in pastoral ministry for forty years. He is the author of numerous books, including the highly acclaimed Disciplines Of A Godly Man, and several commentaries that reflect his many years of diligent expositional ministry. Having just retired from twenty-seven years as the Senior Pastor of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, Kent and his wife, Barbara, are now making their home in Spokane, Washington. Last August I spent a couple of hours with Kent talking about his experiences in the pastoral ministry.*

**Art Azurdia:** Kent, after all these years of experience, talk to us a little about what it means to be a pastor and about some of your deepest convictions related to the pastoral ministry.

**R. Kent Hughes:** Well, being a pastor is obviously a multi-faceted and dynamic concept, but I would say the first thing that comes to my mind is “man of God” which, of course, is an Old Testament term. What I mean is this: Necessary to the whole matter of preaching is that you be a man of God in the sense that you are a man who lives in the Scriptures, applies the Scriptures to your own soul, and lives a life of constant repentance so that the truths you urge upon your listeners are evident in your own life. You’re sympathetic to them and pursuing them in your own life so that when people think of you, they think of a man of God even more than a preacher. Preaching is a major task and requires immense sacrifice and hours of preparation. But I would say that the main thing is that you must be a man of God and, of course, if that’s true, then you’re a man of God in relationship to the leadership of your church, you’re a man of God in relationship to your wife, and you’re a man of God in relationship to your family and your community. That would be where I would root the whole thing.

**AA:** Kent, what happens to a man when that assiduous effort to apply the Word of God to his own life first is not really prominent?

**RKH:** Well, when it’s not prominent, I think you can go ahead and speak God’s words. God used Balaam’s donkey so I think that that kind of thing can happen. But there’s an illustration from Phillips Brooks in which he talks about a man who preaches like an old-fashioned railroad conductor, announcing destinations to which he’s never been. By the mere announcing, “All aboard to Albany! All aboard to Chicago!” he imagines that he’s been to Albany and Chicago. And so you can have men who are self-deluded in that they haven’t been to those destinations. They preach repentance to people though they haven’t truly repented, or they passionately preach of sexual purity to men though they’re not living it out themselves. These pastors become talking heads rather than men of God.

**AA:** And what happens to a man’s soul in the midst of that?

**RKH:** I think there are many things that happen because we’re so complex. There could be conscious duplicity. And certainly that exists out there. But I think it’s more of an unconscious duplicity which is the result of a long line of the mere proclamation of those things. Such men are self-deluded into thinking they practice those things just by virtue of preaching them, perhaps passionately so, imagining that those character qualities or commitments are in their lives. It can be very seductive.

**AA:** I think of Baxter: “I only preach that which I did first smartingly feel.”

**RKH:** Yes, and I think Baxter said somewhere else, “Lest we offer them bread that we’ve never tasted.” It’s the same thing. I think it was John Owen who said that if the word is going to go from you in power it has to first course through your life in order to come out in power.

**AA:** Do you see these convictions being shared by many people in the pastoral arena?

**RKH:** Well, Art, one of the things that helped define preaching for me is passion. And I don’t think there is such a thing as dispassionate preaching.

**AA:** Dr. Lloyd-Jones certainly didn’t.

**RKH:** Right, yes, “logic on fire.” But sometimes I hear biblical exposition which is a type of exegetical explanation rather than the passion of a man whose soul has been plowed by the truths he’s preaching. Now, I don’t want to confuse anybody by implying, “Well, that means if I’m not raising my voice or if I’m not shouting, I’m not passionate.” You can be very passionate and whisper. You could be saying in a very low tone: “This is the most important thing you’ll ever hear; listen very closely.” But it’s got to be a real passion, not a bogus passion; a passion that flows out of an existential interaction with the very word and the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.

**AA:** Some of these convictions that you have about the pastoral ministry, Kent, were they established early on in your ministry or do they reflect some kind of evolution over the many years of labor?

**RKH:** I always believed in Biblical exposition from the time I was a youth pastor back in the sixties right on through, and it was because of my bibliology. I don’t believe that every word is inspired; I believe that every jot and tittle is inspired! So I have a high view of Scripture. I truly believe that the Bible is the very word of God. I believe it with all of my heart. My bibliology, then, affects my approach to preaching so that it’s always been to stand behind the Bible, not in front of the Bible when I preach the word of God. My job is to open the word of God. The evolution, however, has been this: I would say that early on, because I wanted to be so accurate, some of my preaching could fall into the category of exegetical lecture. And actually, it wasn’t intentional and I didn’t know it to be that; it was just that I was so careful and fastidious about not wanting to pervert the word of God. My wife said to me one day, “When you’re preaching you say the most wonderful things, but you say them like they are of little import.” In other words, my own heart’s conviction and passion weren’t evident in my preaching. So I never have affected passion or pretended passion, but I think over the years anybody that has listened to me knows that I truly believe what I preach with all my heart, and desire that they believe it with all my heart, and that I would die for the truths that I’m preaching.

**AA:** Kent, what were some of your initial preconceptions of the pastoral ministry that have been reconfigured after several years of experience?

**KH:** I don’t know if I would say that my preconceptions were radically reconfigured, because I cut my teeth and did my journeyman work under a fine pastor for a decade. While I was a junior high, high school, and college pastor, I watched and learned from a fine pastor.

**RKH:** I worked under Reverend Verl Lindley. He was a Fuller Seminary graduate of the early 1950s when Carl Henry, Gleason Archer, Wilbur Smith, Harold Lindsel, and Edward John Carnell were there. It was quite an array, so he had a great background and was a wonderful man. Because of his influence, I understood that preaching is a character profession and that your ethos, what you are, is very important. I understood about a type of leadership that wasn’t perfunctory but led by example, a leadership that was patient for change. I think I demonstrated that in my twenty-seven years at College Church. I was very patient in moving the ship ahead, so to speak. I learned that kind of long-range attitude, loving my people and being especially caring for my colleagues. I’ve always argued for the best pay possible for my staff and I’ve always honored them. I’ve never treated them as if I’m better because I’m the senior pastor and they are the sub-pastors. I viewed us all as equals. In fact, I think you could say that at any given church,

the guy who is working with the junior high may have a greater theological influence in the lives of his people than the senior pastor. So, it's important to understand those kinds of things.

**AA:** Were there any significant surprises or lessons learned in the last few years of your pastoral labors?

**RKH:** I do think that I have a great optimism for the power of the gospel to save people and change lives. I also, after having preached to the same people for twenty-seven years, understand there are people who can sit week after week under your preaching and never change an iota, which is a dangerous thing for them. They don't change their theological opinions and they don't increase in godliness. In fact, they may go the other way. To sum it up, I believe in the power of the gospel, the power to change lives. I've seen people who have, as Christians, had long-term bad relational habits revolutionized and changed. But I've also seen others that sit under the word with no change. I think of Charles Simeon, after he preached for fifty years at Holy Trinity, falling down in his pulpit and weeping for souls that had remained unconverted though they sat under his ministry for half a century. The radical power of the gospel is the only hope but people can so harden themselves that they can't hear the word of God. I didn't find that to be any easier after forty years of ministry. I didn't find that preaching got easier. I didn't find that leadership got easier. I didn't find that vision got easier. And I think I did well at all of those things. But I found them just as hard after forty years as at the beginning.

**AA:** Are there current trends related to pastoral ministry that arouse concern in you?

**RKH:** While I spent at least twenty hours a week in sermon preparation, I think it's the specialist trend that concerns me the most. And so it could be: "I preach, but I don't do mercy and I don't do administration and I don't do counseling." Or: "I do counseling, but I don't preach." Or: "I do administration and I do vision, but I don't preach." I would say specialization is especially pernicious for those that say they don't preach.

**AA:** Do you think it's indicative of something deeper? Is that what you're intimating?

**RKH:** Well, I think that a pastor is to be a man of prayer and a man of the word and that "pastor" suggests the existence of a flock. But the specialization that comes from business models says, "Go with your passion and do your passion and don't do the things that are not your passion." I don't think it's optional for a pastor to say "I don't do administration." Now you might say "I'm not good at administration." But to say "I don't do it" is not only irresponsible; it represents a type of sloth. One might say "I don't do visitation." Perhaps you find it hard to do visitation, but it doesn't mean you don't do visitation. So I think there's a great danger of producing flat-sided business-type pastors that only do a couple of things and then spread other things around. Here's an analogy: You play junior high basketball. If you're a good athlete, you can get along by going to your right all the time. Once you get into high school, you have to begin using the left. Once you get into college, you must be able to go to your left as well as your right and you better be able to shoot on the run from the left or the right. Otherwise, you'll never be anything. I think that a lot of pastors need to learn to use their left hand. They need to learn to go to their left as well as their right. I think every pastor needs to exercise vision. He may not be naturally visionary but he needs to learn to do it. Every pastor needs to be an adequate administrator. Every pastor needs to understand how to do biblical counseling. Every pastor needs to do biblical exposition. Now the great thing about all of that, Art, and I only named a few things, is that it means that a man in a small church can develop into a kind of renaissance man, doing all of those things as a well-rounded NBA player, so to speak.

**AA:** Did you ever struggle with your identity as a pastor, Kent; that is, really understanding who God called you to be and what He wanted you to be on behalf of His people?

**RKH:** Actually, I don't think I struggled with that, but that may be because I wanted to be a pastor from the time I was twelve, so it was part of my *persona*. I told everybody I was going to be a pastor and I preached my first sermon when I was sixteen. I've always had that identity, but I never understood the pastoral *persona* as defined by a suit and a tie, being a professional. I've always understood that my job is to pastor my family, to be a man of God to my friends, and to be sincerely what I am. I am not one

person in one place and a different person in another place. I think that all my children would say, "My dad is no different in the pulpit or in a business meeting than he is at home. He is the same everywhere." So, I haven't really struggled with that identity. But I've never allowed other people to define it for me. I've never allowed my congregation to define it for me, though there are always people who attempt to do so. I think that one of the banes of evangelical ministries, especially in small churches, is that the average congregant really has a Roman Catholic view of their pastor as the padre, the local priest. They haven't been visited unless they've been visited by the padre. They can go into the hospital and be visited by the elders and be visited by their friends and if the pastor doesn't visit they are quick to assume that the church doesn't care for them. And so what they essentially have is an old Roman view of the pastor as the vicar where there's a special presence of Christ when he comes. I've never conceded to that. But there are people within your congregation who would love to hold you to that.

**AA:** A colleague recently sent me a statistic that indicated that in the United States fifteen hundred men are leaving the pastoral ministry every month for reasons other than retirement or death. What does that say to you?

**RKH:** Well, I think that evangelical pastors in the United States are probably the most abused sub-culture in the country. The abuse is really recent historically. It's always been tough to be a pastor and it's always been tough to be in a small situation. But now with the business models out there, people don't want to be part of something that isn't up and going. And they achieve some of their identity from the ostensible prosperity of the work to which they've given themselves. It's the same thing as going to Costco today rather than the mom and pop store down the street. You may get the service down there at the mom and pop store but Costco is big and it's happening and it's overwhelming. It titillates the sensory perceptions. It gives you the material you want regardless of whether you can afford it. That is going on in our churches and I think that because of the media, pastors find themselves abused. For example, a pastor in Wyoming might have a church of 35 to 70 people including a farmer who listens to tapes of prominent preachers on his headset while he's on his tractor. He comes on Sunday mornings and the sermon doesn't measure up to the polished and sensational evangelical stuff that's being served out there. And so, he lingers after the service and hands the pastor the tape he's been listening to with hopes that it can help his pastor. Historically, a pastor was naturally esteemed in rural America, considered to be the most educated man in town. Certainly, what people heard on Sunday morning was probably more intellectually stimulating than any conversation they had during the week at home or with their friends. They came on Sunday morning and they heard the word of God explained. Now it's lost in this miasma of communication and sensationalism. And I actually think that Christian radio is a major culprit in this because it creates an appetite for a diet of clichés and entertainment and flat-sided social ethics that only emphasize a few issues. People are dissatisfied when they're not getting that kind of stimulation on Sunday morning. I also think that what was fare for a youth group in the 1960s is now what happens on Sunday morning in many churches. It's entertaining pre-digested topical stuff and quite frankly, I think that a lot of what is passed off as hip Christian music is so corny that it's a turn-off to the unsaved person. The only person who enjoys it is the person who has filled him or herself with Christian media.

**AA:** Let's shift gears. You've been retired for about seven months now. What are the aspects of the pastoral ministry that frankly, you're not missing, or from which you feel great relief?

**RKH:** I'm not missing the annual meeting of the church. I don't miss that at all. I don't miss my elders' meetings. Twenty-seven years times ten elders meetings per year is two-hundred seventy elders' meetings at an average of about five hours each. That means I spent thousands of hours in elders' meetings. Toward the end I got to the point where every new idea presented was one I'd heard ten years before. I love my elders, but I don't miss elders' meetings. What I miss the most is the enforced discovery of having to plow through a new text every week and the sense of wonder and awe that you uncover in the most unlikely places in God's word. It was twenty-seven years of being surprised and thrilled every week. I don't miss the marriage counseling or the traumas. When you have a large congregation, you live in constant trauma: two or three people at the verge of eternity and several marriages on the ropes. You live with that constant sense of not being able to come close to getting it done. So I don't miss that.

**AA:** Besides the weekly exposition, what else do you miss?

**RKH:** My colleagues were like my small group. I really did invest myself in my staff. We took two retreats each year that ran from Sunday night to Thursday on which we took the spouses and the babes in arms. All we did was study the Bible in the morning, pray until noon, played all afternoon, and played in the evening while building relationships. We had long staff meetings that used to start at 7:00 in the morning with breakfast and go until 10:30 every week. We prayed for an hour and talked about each others' ministries. I really miss my colleagues that I saw weekly and prayed with and worked with. Corporate worship is another thing that comes to mind. When you have worked as a leader with your people on the hymns that are going to be sung, worked on your pastoral prayer, preached, and you get together with the people of God who are seeing the glory of God, it is amazing. When you're praying and all are united together, when you can hear people affirming what's going on, there is something very wonderful about the gathered body of Christ. There is an encouragement that takes place from singing with the people, affirming the same things, saying "amen" to the reading of God's word, having your Bibles open with all the pages turning at the same time to the text that can't happen individually. There is nothing like gathered worship.

**AA:** If you were given the opportunity to address a group of young men just entering pastoral ministry, what are two or three things you'd want to say to them?

**RKH:** Well, I say this as a cliché but it's very important. Take your ministry seriously. Don't take yourself too seriously. You're totally expendable. God doesn't need you. The notion that God needs anyone is a huge fallacy. The church doesn't need me and it doesn't need you. It doesn't need any of us, so that's what I mean about not taking yourself too seriously. I also believe that the pastor does not have to be a ubiquitous presence, at every meeting with his fingers in every pot. A pastor functioning in that way is taking himself far too seriously. It's as if he believes the Holy Spirit can't work if he's not there. The thing you need to take seriously about yourself is your relationship with God and with your family. And as I said, you need to work for the best in all of these areas. Be the all-around renaissance pastor, taking your ministry and your calling seriously and, at the same time, remember that you don't have to be everywhere. Learn to take a day off. Have meals with your wife, putting everything out of your mind that has to do with the pastoral ministry and engage her. Talk about what she wants to talk about with genuine interest in what is going on with her. Take time with your children and take your vacations. Understand that if you've got a young family with a 3 year-old, a 4 year-old, and a 7 year-old, and you don't take vacation, you'll never take it with the *same* people again because children change so fast. Take advantage of those times and learn to enjoy a meal to the fullest with people.

**AA:** Given the fact that you mentioned you have been doing this forty years, what would you say to a group of pastors who've been at the task twenty years . . . the halfway point?

**RKH:** You've got to be a man of substance. In *Between Two Worlds*, John Stott quotes a bishop by the name of Cyril Garbett. Bishop Garbett said that if you were a liberal pastor who didn't study, at mid-life you'd be known for your hatreds and dislikes. And if you're an evangelical who didn't study you'd be known at mid-life for your sentimentality. I see men that don't make any progress. They can get emotional. They can cry over things. They can tell stories. But they're just sentimentalists . . . evangelical sentimentalists. There is no substance to them. I would tell pastors to keep at the task and to do the main things. The beautiful thing about doing expositional preaching is that I have gone through the book of Genesis, various other books in the Old Testament, and about two-thirds of the New Testament with a fine-toothed comb. I have grown theologically throughout my ministry by opening a new text every week. And I would say that I have grown more theologically in the final ten years than in my early years of ministry. My grasp of biblical theology and my grasp of the whole Bible have been significantly enhanced. About thirteen years ago, I was introduced to a very elementary book by some of my friends in Australia: Graeme Goldsworthy's *Gospel and Kingdom*. It opened that whole area of biblical theology to me and I began to see the Bible in a different way. I always *said* that the Bible is a book about Christ from beginning to end, but I began to *understand* how wondrously it is a book about Christ. Every pastor is a theologian and ought to say to himself, "I am a theologian." It's not a self-serving term. You're either a good theologian, a modest theologian, or a poor theologian, but every pastor is a theologian and so I think the *persona* you need to take is that you're a pastor-theologian. And if you are constantly studying

the Scriptures and constantly reading, you're constantly growing as a theologian. I wish that would sink into every pastor's identity to the point he'd say, "I'm a pastor-theologian."

**AA:** Kent, in what ways do you expect to be investing in ministry in this stage of your life?

**RKH:** What I'm going to be doing as I get rooted here in Spokane is conducting eight-day residential seminars on biblical exposition. The preparation might be to read the book of Ephesians twenty times consecutively in the six weeks before arriving including reading the Greek two or three times if the pastor knows the language. We would sit down and get the whole theme of the book under our belts on the initial day. I'd help people work through that and then we would divide it up into homiletical sections, working from principle on how to preach the whole book. Devotions would come out of it, studies would come out of it, preaching would come out of it. I plan to work with pastors in small groups so that when they go back to their churches, they might have twenty-five homiletical sections with rudimentary skeleton outlines and a few expositions prepared, and they would be able to explain the theme of the book, the structure of the book, and the theme of all those passages.

**AA:** Sounds great. Sounds like it will be very wonderful. And do you expect to be teaching Doctor of Ministry courses and the like?

**RKH:** Yes, I will teach some, but I don't want to get myself so overbooked. I made the mistake during my first few months of retirement of saying "yes" to everything, and I wasn't even here during the first two months. So I'm trying to really keep control of my life.

**AA:** Well, I hope these prove to be happy days for you.

**RKH:** Thanks, Art.

*R. Kent Hughes will be addressing **The Spurgeon Fellowship** on September 9, 2008.*