

# DR. JONES, DOWN-TO-EARTH INTELLECTUAL

*Writer for the 'Academy' says, "Short, punchy sentences will do."*

Mark Jones, pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church in Vancouver, Canada, is an atypical academic. Conversations with Mark typically revolve around one of two topics: theology or soccer, both stemming from two different career paths, both types of conversations involving many of “the greats.” He is unexpectedly down-to-earth for someone who wrote his PhD dissertation on the 17<sup>th</sup> century English Puritan, Thomas Goodwin; when asked what made him want to become a successful writer he responded flatly, “I’m not a successful writer.” Perhaps both this matter-of-fact attitude and his two passions are in part due to where he was raised: South Africa. Jones often talks of how blunt Patrick Stevenson, the South African preacher under whom he was converted, can be, something Jones credits partly for his own ability to write and speak effectively. His first suggestion to other writers is to find a mentor who will be brutally honest.

Educated at a variety of universities including University of Wisconsin-Madison, Mount Allison University, Potchefstroom University, and Leiden University, Dr. Jones has had to actively resist turning into an out-of-touch intellectual, something that would keep him from his career in the pastoral ministry. One of his supervisors, Michael Haykin, noticed a trend toward high intellectualism in Mark’s writing and informed him that he was, as he puts it, “beginning to write like the Puritans, which wasn't a compliment!” In

order to combat this trend, he now considers the most important thing to remember when he writes to be to “try not to appear as a pedantic, pontificating, pretentious know-it-all” (i.e., how many people find the puritans), and adopting this attitude makes his writing—despite being centered on what most consider lofty topics—enjoyable and applicable.

Jones dislikes writing about things he doesn’t feel a passion for, while he most enjoys writing about the person and work of Christ, that is, Christology. His conversion happened during his first ever year at University, marking the time that he began to enjoy writing, and also marking the premature end of his first career in soccer due to a knee injury. Mark still enjoys playing soccer with friends and the church soccer team as well as watching the various international soccer competitions. (His favorite team is Liverpool, a fact that has evoked many playful arguments with Michael Skibo, one of the members of Mark’s congregation, a Chelsea fan.) His toddler son, Joshua, seems to have already picked up the knack; “Ball!” he says every time he sees something round, be it an apple or a giant exercise ball, before trying to kick or throw it.

Mark’s writing skills did not come easily, his using *is* too often being a terrible problem. “My MA supervisor, Bob McKelvey, spent a lot of money on red pens, if you know what I mean,” he reminisces, “He used to stand at his office window when I was walking by and hang my

thesis out the window yelling the following (in a fake Scottish accent): ‘Mr. Jones, Mr. Jones, is English your second language?’” Despite such harsh criticism, Jones wouldn’t have it any other way, preferring harsh but honest criticism to disingenuous praise.

While most of Dr. Jones’s writing has been done for what he calls the Academy (a consortium of theological schools), he hopes to write more for the Church in the future: when asked who his audience is, he responded, “Scholars of Post-Reformation Reformed theology, especially Puritanism. But I do hope to write more for the Church than the Academy.” Although Jones describes his office as his favorite environment in which to write because it contains all of what he calls his “friends” (his term for his books), no one would describe him as a stuffy academic. “Mark is a great guy, a really kind hearted guy”—comments like these are typical of other pastors who have known him, and, almost as a play on this, Mark has placed a sign that reads “Complaints department” with a button on it on his church office door—with a visible mousetrap ready to strike anyone’s finger that dares push it.

Mark’s completion strategy for writing also reflects his down-to-earth attitude; according to him, the best time for him to start his work is right at the deadline so he is forced to be efficient, something that gives him more time for his family and studies. He also enjoys taking time off from writing during the afternoon, preferring the early morning and late evenings to do his work.

Asked to define when he knows when a piece is finished, Jones responds, his straight-shooting style coming through: “When I feel like I won’t totally humiliate myself with the piece in question.” Despite his extensive educational background, Mark has never taken a course designed specifically to improve his writing, although he acknowledges that it may be a good idea for some.

Mark also has some very specific technical suggestions to aspiring writers, suggestions born through making his own mistakes. “Don’t quote too much,” Mark says, “especially from secondary sources.” According to Mark, the academics are often ridden with writers patting each other on the back for their own accomplishments, not coming up with original work. In order to come up with ideas, he enjoys taking runs as well as trying to get into the minds of great thinkers. Taking a break from writing and preparing sermons or visiting old age homes helps Mark get past writers block.

Mark’s career in writing is far from complete; he’s only twenty-nine, the primary reason I chose him to be the subject of this piece. Asked where he hopes his writing will take him, he responded, as Thomas Goodwin, the Puritan subject of his dissertation, likely would have, “To heaven. In other words, I don’t want to be a false teacher!” For now though, Mark will continue to bless his Vancouver congregation with his studies in Christology, Christology that is sprinkled throughout his sermons and made assessable to adults and children alike.