

The oversight of souls

Essays on pastoral ministry

This marvelous reminder about the heart of pastoral ministry is must reading for pastors and pastors in training. In our media-driven age, when all too many Christians are enamored with celebrities and all too many churches feature onstage performance more than personal discipleship, Van Neste's bold emphasis on caring for souls is a Godsend. May the Lord use it powerfully to call church leaders back to forming and shepherding the people in our care. And may he use it, as well, to call seminaries back to being schools in which these practices are taught, embodied and commended through in-person, soul-shaping, life-changing pedagogy.

Douglas A. Sweeney

Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama

A pastor once shared with me a distressing confession: "I don't love the people of this church." Over many years of working with churches and pastors, it's become clear that loving public speaking, vision casting, programming or building construction is more common than loving "smelly sheep." However, if I understand correctly, these are the very people pastors are commissioned to shepherd. It's all too familiar to hear church members say, "He's a talented speaker, but not much of a pastor."

Dr. Ray Van Neste's insightful book reminds us of the importance of soul care in pastoral roles, with a timely relevance. It's my hope the message in this book will touch us deeply, prompting a reversal of this unfortunate trend. The Chief Shepherd's strategy remains unchanged, yet flocks continue to suffer. Let not the epitaph of your congregation read, "They were as sheep without a shepherd." Gain help in this book.

Jim Elliff

Christian Communicators Worldwide

Ray Van Neste is on to something vital for today's pastor. Having recently, along with Justin Wainscott, edited and republished Theodore Cuyler's great little book, *How To Be a Pastor*, Ray now publishes his own book on the subject, *The Oversight of Souls*. Rooted in faithful exegesis of Scripture and liberally garnished with quotes from Calvin, Bucer, Luther, Baxter and Spurgeon, Dr. Van Neste challenges church shepherds to know their sheep spiritually and deeply through regular personal visitation. It may sound arcane in an age of social media, but nothing could be more relevant or urgent. Van Neste quotes Thomas Chalmers: "A house-going minister makes a church-going people." I commend this book and urge church leaders to read it.

Sandy Willson

Interim president, The Gospel Coalition; pastor emeritus, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee

I've spent most of my life in pastoral ministry. The challenges of ministry never eased. Despite better skills with study, prayer and experience, the weight of caring for souls lingered. At times I'd grow weary, looking at pastoral work as a job instead of a divinely appointed shepherding ministry for which I would give an account. I needed reminders on such occasions of what it means to be a pastor. For those who know this experience, Ray Van Neste has provided just the resource needed in *The Oversight of Souls*. As a pastor, professor, mentor, pastoral model and doctor of souls, Ray mines Scripture and pastoral history in five biblical, theological and historical essays, setting before pastors the nature and practice of the oversight of souls. Our generation needs the reminders of those who modelled shepherding in far more difficult days, lest we grow soft and anemic in our labours. Pastor, read this book; you'll treasure it. Seminary student, read this book before embarking on pastoral work—and return to it regularly to drink from this spring of pastoral refreshment.

Phil A. Newton

Retired pastor; director of pastoral care & mentoring for the Pillar Network and visiting professor of pastoral theology, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina

The call of a pastor is the oversight of souls. Ray Van Neste has been waving this banner for a long time, which is why I am so thankful to see these essays finally published. This book is beautifully written. Its greatest value is how the author takes the biblical texts that define pastoral ministry and marries them so well with some of the most significant writings on being a pastor from church history. The sources Van Neste uses in his essays alone are worth the price of the book. Every pastor and especially aspiring ones should read this book slowly and carefully.

Brian Croft

Executive director, Practical Shepherding (practicalshepherding.com)

Steeped in the wisdom of the ancients, forged through years of experience and pulsing with scriptural reflection, *The Oversight of Souls* is a succinct yet engaging manual of pastoral theology. Van Neste gives readers a classical vision of soul care that is both timely and timeless. Readers will find themselves compelled to enter this realm of classical shepherding, wondering how they could have believed any other vision of pastoral ministry to be true!

Coleman M. Ford

Assistant professor of humanities, Southwestern Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, and co-author of *Ancient Wisdom for the Care of Souls*

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Ray Van Neste



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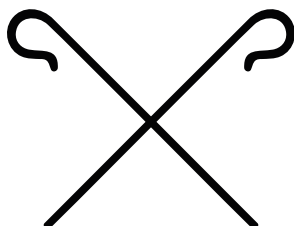
The oversight of souls: Essays on pastoral ministry

By Ray Van Neste

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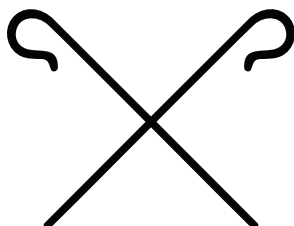
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To my brother, Scott Van Neste,
who has faithfully lived out the pastoral vision I seek
to articulate here, who has borne the brunt of the
pastoral battle, has the scars to show for it, and
even more still has the joy and love of the Master.
Your faithful, joyful perseverance has been a model.
Only eternity will reveal the impact you have had.



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Preface

In 2009 I reworked my course on pastoral ministry at Union University, Jackson, TN, to meet what I saw as a crying need. I included in the syllabus a statement, which I continue to use and which also describes this book:

It is my conviction that pastoral ministry is at a point of crisis in Western Christianity. As the church has begun taking her cues from the culture, the ideas governing pastoral ministry have become secularized resulting in significant damage to the church. As Lothar of Saxony (twelfth-century Holy Roman emperor) said, “When those who have the title of shepherd play the part of wolves, heresy grows in the garden of the Church.” If the church is to be revived and reformed, we must seek a return to biblical priorities in pastoral ministry. This class is intended as a small step toward that grand goal.

As always the path to reform begins with an earnest return to the Scriptures, allowing them to challenge our presuppositions and to set our agenda. Then we must “return to the ancient paths” (Jeremiah 6:16) listening to the church’s conversations about interpreting and applying Scripture in reference to pastoral ministry across the ages. Listening only to our own age can serve simply to reinforce our presuppositions. Voices from the past are not correct simply because of their age, but they can challenge our basic assumptions and help us see past the illusion of our era. Thus, we will study together the key biblical texts, wrestling with interpretive issues and concrete applications. We will also read key works on pastoral ministry ranging from the close of the sixth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Our cry will be *ad fontes*,¹ and our goal will be to grasp a thoroughly biblical view of pastoral ministry, that we might by God’s grace practice biblical pastoral ministry.

In many ways, this book grew out of that pastoral ministry class and my own practical ministry experience. These essays do not address every text or issue relevant to pastoral ministry, but I do seek to speak to the *heart* of pastoral ministry according to the biblical text, read in concert with the church throughout the ages.

Chapter 1 is my argument for a biblical understanding of pastoral ministry. In biblical language—embraced by the church across the ages—pastors are called to the *oversight of souls*. That is why this phrase was chosen for the title of the book. Chapter 2 demonstrates how this understanding of pastoral duty animated and prompted the Reformation and calls us to follow that path. Chapter 3, by examining what is meant in the book of Acts by the phrase, “ministry of the Word,” refutes a common misconception of pastoral ministry and a common argument against the necessity of soul care by pastors. Chapter 4 examines Paul’s

¹ Literally, “to the sources.”

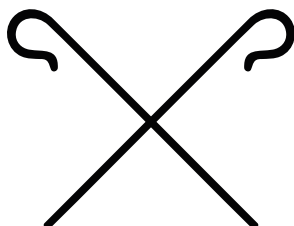
exhortation to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:14–26, seeking to discern the contours of a ministry that is approved by God. Directly addressed to those in training for ministry, it applies just as well to those already engaged in pastoral ministry. One of the key problems with overseeing souls is often those souls do not want overseeing. Chapter 5 treats the golden calf incident (Exodus 32) as an example of shepherding rebellious people, drawing lessons for us today. Then, having argued for a large understanding of the pastoral task, and aware of how daunting it is, the book closes with a word of encouragement, urging pastors to hold fast, trusting the Lord to do *his* work through our faithful though faltering efforts.

It is my earnest prayer that this book will both challenge and encourage pastors, and those considering this high calling. The church is in need of faithful men who will love her and not use her for self-serving grandstanding, for men who will care for souls and not for worldly acclaim, for men who will live for his smile and not care for the approval of men. This is a task worthy of spending and being spent for.

Every time we look on our congregations, let us believingly remember, that they are the purchase of Christ's blood, and therefore should be regarded by us with the most tender affection.²

Ray Van Neste
August 2024

² Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (New York: American Tract Society, 1862), 197–198.



Acknowledgements

Many people have played a part in this book coming together. Groups and individuals are acknowledged in each essay for invitations which gave me the opportunity—and the impetus—to pull my thoughts together. I also appreciate the students who have enrolled in my pastoral ministry class at Union University over the last twenty-plus years where many of these ideas have been hammered out.

Jim Elliff's writings first prodded my thinking in the direction of the oversight of souls. Union University presidents David Dockery and Dub Oliver have encouraged a pastoral vision. David Dockery gave me the invitations, which led to the development of two of these essays. Dub Oliver entrusted me with the role of leading our School of Theology & Missions which led to the opportunity for developing another of these essays.

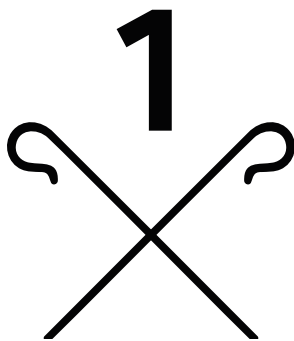
My colleague and former pastor, Justin Wainscott, has been a particular encouragement in this project as one who shares and

has lived out this vision. Mike Garrett, also a colleague and long-time friend, has regularly provided helpful feedback on my essays. Jon Pope, who was in one of my pastoral ministry classes, read the entire manuscript, helping me to shape the essays into a consistent whole. As he has begun his own pastoral ministry, it is a delight to see his faithfulness.

I first began to flesh out these ideas while serving as one of the pastors of Cornerstone Community Church in Jackson, TN, alongside Lee Tankersley and Nathan Young. I owe much to these brothers and that congregation. Tulip Grove Baptist Church in Mt. Juliet, TN, has faithfully prayed for the completion and publication of this book. I am very grateful for their continued interest and care after I had the privilege of serving as their interim pastor. Thank you, Gary LaRoy, for faithfully inquiring each week how you all might pray.

I am grateful to Michael Haykin for his encouragement and thoughts on where to publish this book. I deeply appreciate Janice Van Eck's keen editorial eye as she guided the final stage of the work and often saved me from poor wording.

As always, my wife, Tammie, has been a faithful encouragement, as she has believed in what I do and has nudged me to commit more things to print.



The oversight of souls

Returning to the heart of pastoral ministry¹

Introduction: Statement of the problem

If pastoral ministry is going to thrive in our churches, we need to regain an understanding of the centrality of the oversight of souls. In fact, I believe the heart of pastoral ministry is this attentive *care of souls*. For many in our day *management* is considered the central aspect of pastoral ministry. For many others *preaching* is considered the most fundamental aspect of pastoral ministry. The renewed emphasis on substantive preaching in many quarters is to be celebrated, but preaching is not the heart of pastoral

¹ An earlier form of this chapter appeared as “The Care for Souls: Reconsidering Pastoral Ministry in Southern Baptist and Evangelical Contexts,” in *Southern Baptists, Evangelicals, and the Future of Denominationalism*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2011).

ministry; rather preaching is an outflow of oversight. We do not guard souls in order to preach. Rather we preach as one means of guarding souls.

Our central task is not managing good programs, drawing large crowds or even delivering powerful messages. Our central task is shepherding souls as they depart the City of Destruction and hazard their way toward the Celestial City.

It is so easy to forget this or to miss it altogether. And when we do, all else is skewed. Ministry to masses can overshadow the needs of individuals, programs can replace people and sermons can become lightweight pep talks or, even when soundly biblical, they can end up abstract lectures which fail to provide real guidance for people as they struggle with sin, self and Satan.

Put simply, our current setting will, if given half a chance, suck all the personal, pastoral care and concern out of our ministries, replacing it with slick professionalism, which is efficient but impersonal and lacking in real spiritual power.

This lack is being noticed and is showing up in the growing number of books on the discontent of believers with church. Even in 2009, Julia Duin in *Quitting Church*, based on wide and varied interviews, discussed several reasons why otherwise mature believers were deeply disaffected with the church. Among those reasons was the lack of pastoral care. She wrote, “My research suggested that people simply were not being pastored. Often ministers are out of touch with what’s happening on the ground.”²

She cited difficulties people had getting in touch with their pastors or in finding care and guidance for their souls. People often felt they were just supposed to attend mass meetings, fill their cog in the machine and not expect anything more. They did not feel shepherded, or that anyone was engaging their day-to-day world.

In her work Duin interviewed Eugene Peterson who perhaps

² Julia Duin, *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What To Do About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 22–23.

as much as anyone in our day has thought and written profoundly on the importance of shepherding God's flock, and Peterson said:

It's the job of pastors, he added, to know about their sheep and not dump the job on a subordinate. "People deserve to have their name known," he said. "They deserve to have somebody who is a spiritual guide and a preacher and pastor to them and who has had a cup of coffee in the kitchen. There is so much alienation, so much loneliness around us. Classically, that is what a pastor does. We've lost that. Of course some people think I'm out to lunch because we don't do that in America. We do something big and influential and cost-efficient. Well, a pastoral life is not cost-efficient, I'll tell you. You don't spend three hours in a nursing home and come away feeling like you've been cost-efficient."³

Calvin Miller has written winsomely on this issue in his book *O Shepherd Where Art Thou?* He states,

Most often when people do leave the church they are leaving because they feel the church failed to minister to them in a time of need. Yet pastors are often more stimulated to make their church grow than to take care of its members in their needy times. No one ever gets his or her picture in an evangelical magazine simply because they visited the sick.⁴

Of course, people are not free to give up on the church just because they are dissatisfied, but we would do well to hear the complaints that are being given to see what substance they have. Duin's research for example traced the lack of connectedness so many people feel, even in places where good sermons are being given. Good preaching is essential. It is just not *all* that is needed.

³ Cited in Duin, *Quitting Church*, 126.

⁴ Calvin Miller, *O Shepherd, Where Art Thou?* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2006), 42.

Larry Crabb has provocatively written:

Perhaps it is time to screw up our courage and attack the sacred cow: we must admit that simply knowing the contents of the Bible is not a sure route to spiritual growth. There is an awful assumption in evangelical circles that if we can just get the Word of God into people's heads, then the Spirit of God will apply it to their hearts. That assumption is awful, not because the Spirit never does what the assumption supposes, but because it has excused pastors and leaders from the responsibility to tangle with people's lives. Many remain safely hidden behind pulpits, hopelessly out of touch with the struggles of their congregations, proclaiming the Scriptures with a pompous accuracy that touches no one.⁵

Now that is a tough statement. It may be overstated, but there is truth here. It is too easy to remain aloof from our people, failing to get our hands dirty in the day-to-day business of actually applying the truths we preach. This reality has been understood and addressed through the history of the church, and we need to consider this once again.

If we are in earnest about the salvation of souls, we must labour in the teaching of the Word *and* in the careful oversight of the souls of our flock. These two activities cannot rightly be divorced. John Angell James (1785–1859) in his classic book on pastoral ministry, *An Earnest Ministry*, stated, “Good preaching and good shepherding are quite compatible with each other, and he who is in earnest will combine both.”⁶

Careful oversight may not make us famous since people cannot download our oversight onto their smartphones, but our preaching cannot be what it ought to be without this care for individual souls.

⁵ Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1988), 160.

⁶ John Angell James, *An Earnest Ministry: The Want of the Times* (1847; repr. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1993), 149.

We need to look again at the Scriptures and the witness of the church through the ages to discern what the heart of pastoral ministry should be. We need to consider the past in order to give perspective to our contemporary conversations. If we only listen to ourselves and our contemporaries, we can fool ourselves into thinking a certain idea is the only way to think, when in fact we may be the first people in history to think this way. By thinking along with the best minds of previous generations we can be, as C.S. Lewis (1898–1963) put it, rescued from “the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone” of our own age.⁷

If you look through the history of the church, you find that the importance of the oversight of souls is not limited to any one denomination, or even to evangelicalism. It is truly part of the Great Tradition. This is an issue where Christians can and should unite.

I cannot here cover all the relevant scriptural texts or historical affirmations. I will focus on some key texts and then in the discussion of these texts use selected quotes from across the range (chronologically and ecclesiastically) of church history. The historical witness alongside scriptural texts serves to demonstrate that this reading of Scripture is not unique but is the common voice of the church.⁸

Scriptural texts on pastoral ministry

We are not at a loss for texts about pastoral ministry though it seems they are not referenced enough. When thinking of the pastor’s role we ought to look first to Jesus himself, the “Great Shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20). In John 10, Jesus describes himself as the true Shepherd and in so doing gives us a picture of what true under-shepherds should be as well:

⁷ C.S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1980), 58–59.

⁸ Chapter two examines more fully the witness of the Reformation era to this point.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep (John 10:11–15).

Undoubtedly one reason the term “pastor” or “shepherd” is used in the New Testament of pastors is to connect with the work and example of Jesus as the Great Shepherd. Notice, first of all, the care given to the sheep. The true under-shepherd must be one who does not run at the approach of danger. Rather he is one who stands by his post defending the sheep even giving his life if necessary. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom (d. AD 407) applied this passage to pastoral ministry stating,

A great thing, beloved, a great thing is the role of leader in the Church. It is one that requires much wisdom, and as great courage as Christ’s words indicate: namely, sufficient to lay down one’s life for the sheep; sufficient never to leave them unprotected and exposed to danger; and sufficient to stand firm against the attack of the wolf.⁹

Notice also that Jesus explicitly says he knows his sheep. There is no way to guard the sheep if you do not know them.

Alexander Maclaren commenting on this passage wrote:

⁹ John Chrysostom, “Homily 60,” in *Saint John Chrysostom: Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist (Homilies 48–88)*, vol. 41 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), 133.

Individualising care and tender knowledge of each are marks of the true shepherd. To call by name implies this and more. To a stranger all sheep are alike; the shepherd knows them apart. It is a beautiful picture of loving intimacy, lowliness, care, and confidence, and one which every teacher should ponder. Contrast this with the Pharisees' treatment of the blind man.¹⁰

More on this later.¹¹

Next, we look at perhaps the key text in this discussion, Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Notice that this passage posits significant authority in the pastors (and it is not really softened by translating “obey” as “be persuaded by”). Notice also though, this authority is directly tied to the work of watching over souls. Pastors have authority in the church precisely because they are to be guarding souls. And, then, the Scripture makes the important point that pastors are to engage the work of this oversight in a manner shaped by the realization that God himself will call them to account. Here we

¹⁰ Alexander Maclaren, *The Gospel of St. John*, Bible Class Expositions (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893), 106.

¹¹ After studying this passage in John in my pastoral ministry class, one student wrote:

This passage is an encouragement to me as one who feels called to preach the Word of God. If I become a pastor, I must love the sheep like Jesus did. I must be willing to die for my flock and guard my flock from wolves. I must be willing to encourage and rebuke my flock and always do what is for their eternal good. I must set an example for them in everything so that their faith may not be shaken by my poor leadership. What an enormous responsibility awaits me. May I never take it lightly.

are given a clear statement about what God expects of pastors and what he will hold us accountable for on the final day. No mention is made here of drawing crowds, building buildings or managing programs. Those things may be fine, but in the end what matters is the oversight of souls.

But what is meant here by “watch over souls”? The term is used elsewhere with the sense of watchfulness, staying awake, guarding and protecting. We are to keep watch over our congregations, protecting them and guiding them by providing clear biblical teaching and personally rebuking and encouraging. As John Owen (1616–1683) in the seventeenth century wrote:

And the apostle compriseth herein the whole duty of the pastoral office.... The work and design of these rulers [pastors] is solely to take care of your souls,—by all means to preserve them from evil, sin, backsliding; to instruct them and feed them; to promote their faith and obedience; that they may be led safely to eternal rest. For this end is their office appointed and herein do they labour continually.¹²

This idea is why Martin Bucer (1491–1551), leader of the Reformation in Strasbourg in the sixteenth century, titled his treatise on pastoral ministry, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*. It is striking also that he refers to a pastor as *Seelsorger*, a “carer of souls.”¹³

This will require personal knowledge of the sheep. It will not be accomplished merely by sermons fired at random. We again must be like the Good Shepherd who pursues the wandering sheep. This task cannot be fulfilled in the pulpit alone. It requires us to commit to following up with our people. As a pastor I taught our people that we say to fellow members, “We will love you

¹² John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1855), 465.

¹³ Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), vii.

enough to chase you down should you ever wander away. You can choose to break your connection with us but you will not just slip away and be forgotten.”

John Erskine (1721–1803) an eighteenth century Scottish Presbyterian wrote:

Sermons, like arrows shot at a venture, seldom hit the mark when we do not know the character of our hearers; and, in many instances, our knowledge of their character must be imperfect if we contract no familiarity with them.¹⁴

Similarly, Charles Brown (1806–1884), in Scotland in the nineteenth century also wrote:

After a long ministry I do not hesitate to express my belief, that...the best preaching will lose much of its power without the systematic visiting of the flock at their homes.

Not only must the minister remain thus a stranger, to a large extent, to their condition and necessities, and so have to preach to them very much at random, but he shall fail of securing that kindly esteem and affectionate confidence at their hands, without which, however he may win their mere respect by his pulpit ministrations, his preaching will probably fail to a great extent of its grand use and end. As the people will most surely bid that minister right welcome to their homes whose voice they hear with joy on the Sabbaths, so will they return with fresh and ever-growing joy to the church, to listen to *his* voice whom they have found the sympathizing friend and counselor of their loved families.¹⁵

¹⁴ John Erskine, “Difficulties of the Pastoral Office,” in *The Christian Pastor’s Manual*, ed. John Brown (1826, 1991; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2003), 191–192. Erskine goes on to comment on how difficult this is with a large congregation.

¹⁵ Charles J. Brown, *The Ministry: Addresses to Students of Divinity* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2006), 84.

A similar point was made by nineteenth-century New England Congregationalist Silas Aiken (1799–1869):

A particular oversight and care of the flock...is involved in the idea of the pastoral work...and can no more be pushed aside or ignored, than any other part. ...the man who assumes the sacred office, and, in the neglect of the personal inspection and private instruction of the souls committed to his care, thinks to discharge his obligations by his pulpit labors, is sadly derelict in duty. He sets aside the scriptural model, and sets up a standard of his own devising instead.¹⁶

This is what is in view when in the New Testament pastors are called *overseers*. This does not refer to management in our business model, but to the task of overseeing *souls*, watching out for the flock, fighting off wolves and pursuing wandering sheep.

This theme is also found in Peter's famous exhortation to pastors in 1 Peter 5:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:1–4).

Here we are told to *shepherd* and *exercise oversight*. These two activities cannot be fully covered by preaching. Certainly preaching is an important element, but shepherding in these contexts

¹⁶ Silas Aiken, "On Pastoral Duties," *The Congregational Quarterly* 8 (January 1866): 30.

would also conjure up the image of guarding, pursuing and personal care.

These themes also show up in Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:

You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you *in public and from house to house*, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.... *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood* (Acts 20:18–21, 28, italics added).

This passage is significant as Paul's summary of his own ministry. At this point, some readers might find themselves thinking, "But the apostles in Acts 6 said their priority was to be the ministry of the Word and prayer. How does this fit with what you are saying?" This passage shows how it fits very well. Paul shows his ministry of the Word involved not only public proclamation but also proclamation "from house to house." If we would follow the apostolic pattern, we must give public *and* private instruction.¹⁷ As we spend time with the people in our congregation, we speak truth to them in the midst of everyday life, as well as preaching it on Sunday. This every-day, private ministry is so important, showing that what is discussed in church is really supposed to be lived out in daily life.

This is also affirmed in the Westminster *Directory of Public Worship* (1645) which says,

¹⁷ This topic is pursued further in chapter 3.

It is the duty of the minister not only to teach the people committed to his charge in public, but privately; and particularly to admonish, exhort, reprove, and comfort them, upon all seasonable occasions, so far as his time, strength, and personal safety will permit.¹⁸

As Richard Baxter (1615–1691) cautioned, “I fear most those ministers who preach well, and who are unsuited to the private nurture of their members.”¹⁹ Rather, this sort of pastoral ministry grows out of real care and affection for the people under our care. This is simply not a task that can be done with our hearts carefully tucked away.

I have often heard young pastors counselled not to get too close to their church members. They are encouraged to keep a “professional” or even “prophetic” distance. In one case the advice was that getting too close would make it too difficult to deliver rebuke when needed. This advice is not only unhelpful, it is downright ungodly! Rebuke ought not be delivered if it is too easy. It is the wounds of a friend that are faithful,²⁰ not the cool correction of a hired hand.

Such emotional distance is not the biblical model. Notice what Paul writes to the Thessalonians:

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.... But we were *gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children*. So, *being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us*.

¹⁸ “Concerning Visitation of the Sick,” in *The Directory for the Public Worship of God, Agreed Upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster 1645* (1845; repr., New York: Robert Kennedy, 1880), 32.

¹⁹ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), rev. ed., ed. James M. Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 7.

²⁰ Proverbs 27:6.

For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, *like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you* and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy (1 Thessalonians 2:1, 7–12, 19–20, italics added).

Does this sound like a man who has been careful not to get his affections wrapped up with his people? Of course not! The only way we will “labor and toil” working “night and day” is if our people become “very dear to us” so that we are “affectionately desirous” of them. And this sort of affection will only grow as you get to know them, walk with them, share in their joys and sorrows and then permit them to walk alongside you sharing your joys and griefs as well. Then we will treat them like gentle mothers and concerned fathers.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther (1483–1546), is often known for being fiery and even rough. Yet notice how he speaks of the love of a pastor for his congregation:

Men who hold the office of the ministry should have the heart of a mother toward the church; for if they have no such heart, they soon become lazy and disgusted, and suffering, in particular, will find them unwilling.... Unless your heart toward the sheep is like that of a mother toward her children—a mother, who walks through fire to save her children—you will not be fit to be a preacher. Labor, work, unthankfulness, hatred, envy, and all kinds of sufferings will meet you in this

office. If, then, the mother heart, the great love, is not there to drive the preachers, the sheep will be poorly served.²¹

Moving forward one century, to the seventeenth, Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661) is a powerful example of deep affection for one's congregation. Having been torn away from his people and exiled for his devotion to the gospel, Rutherford wrote letters to his people exhorting, counselling, challenging and teaching them. The collection of these letters is now considered a spiritual classic. In one letter in particular, he addressed his congregation as a whole:

Dearly beloved and longed-for in the Lord, my crown and my joy in the day of Christ, Grace be to you, and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

I long exceedingly to know if the oft-spoken-of match betwixt you and Christ holdeth, and if ye follow on to know the Lord. My day-thoughts and my night-thoughts are of you; while ye sleep I am afraid of your souls, that they be off the rock. Next to my Lord Jesus and this fallen kirk, ye have the greatest share of my sorrow, and also of my joy; ye are the matter of the tears, care, fear, and daily prayers of an oppressed prisoner of Christ. As I am in bonds for my high and lofty One, my royal and princely Master, my Lord Jesus; so I am in bonds for you.... What could I want, if my ministry among you should make a marriage between the little bride in those bounds and the Bridegroom? Oh, how rich a prisoner were I, if I could obtain of my Lord (before whom I stand for you) the salvation of you all! Oh, what a prey had I gotten, to have you caught in Christ's net! Oh, then I had cast out my Lord's lines and His net with a rich gain! Oh then, well-wared pained breast, and sore back, and crazed

²¹ Martin Luther, "Ministers" in *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (1959; repr., Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1994), 932.

body, in speaking early and late to you!... My witness is above; your heaven would be two heavens to me, and the salvation of you all as two salvations to me. I would subscribe a suspension, and a fristing of my heaven for many hundred years (according to God's good pleasure), if ye were sure in the upper lodging, in our Father's house, before me.²²

This is a pastor's heart!

When we have this sort of affection for our people, we will be able to say of our churches the sort of things we find the apostle Paul saying, "For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 3:8). This also then explains Paul's description of his pastoral aims in Colossians:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, *warning everyone and teaching everyone* with all wisdom, that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me (Colossians 1:24–29, italics added).

Part of what is striking in this passage is the emphasis on individuals. Paul sought to warn and teach each member with the goal of presenting *each one* mature in Christ. This aim should animate our ministries. Too often today leaders are content with

²² Samuel Rutherford, "Letter 225", *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh, UK: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, n.d.), 438–439.

seeing maturity or even attendance in a “significant percentage” of the membership. But this is not Paul’s aim. We are to labour and suffer to see that each one attains maturity in Christ. John Calvin (1509–1564) wrote,

The office of a true and faithful minister is not only publicly to teach the people over whom he is ordained to pastor, but, so far as may be, to admonish, exhort, rebuke, and console each one in particular.²³

One of the early Baptist confessions of faith includes the following affirmation:

That the members of every church or congregation ought to know one another, so they may perform all the duties of love to one another, both spiritually and physically. (Matt. 18:15; 1 Thes. 5:14; 1 Cor. 12:25) And especially the elders ought to know the whole flock over which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3) Therefore a church ought not to consists of such a multitude that each member cannot have individual knowledge of one another.²⁴

Furthermore, Henry Scougal (1650–1678), prominent Scottish pastor and theologian who profoundly influenced both George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, wrote:

But certainly the greatest and most difficult work of a minister is in applying himself particularly to the various persons under his charge; to acquaint himself with their behaviour and the temper of their souls; to redress what is amiss and

²³ John Calvin, “Visitation of the Sick,” in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 2, ed. by Henry Beveridge (1849; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 127.

²⁴ “A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland” (1611), in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed., ed. William L. Lumpkin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1959), 121.

prevent their future miscarriages. Without this private work, his other endeavors will do little good....

Now this supposes a great deal of care, to acquaint ourselves with the humors and conversation of our people; and the name of “watchmen” that is given to us implies no less.²⁵

Furthermore, Richard Baxter, considered by some, the consummate pastor, wrote eloquently on this subject in his classic book, *The Reformed Pastor*. Here are some pertinent samples, which really sum up the argument to this point:

But our second concern must also be for *individuals* in the church. We need therefore to know every person that belongs to our charge. For how can we take heed to them unless we know them? We should know completely those in our flock. As a careful shepherd looks after every individual sheep, or as a good schoolmaster looks after every individual student, or as a good doctor knows each of his patients—in these ways we should know them. Christ Himself, the great and good Shepherd, takes care of every individual.... We, too, must give an account of our watch over the souls of all that are bound to obey us (Hebrews 13:7). Many more passages of Scripture assure us that it is our duty to take heed to every individual person that is in our flock. And many passages in the ancient church council do plainly tell us that it was also the practice in those days to do likewise. In one passage, Ignatius says, “Let assemblies be often gathered; inquire into all by name, despise not servant-men or maidens” So you see it was then taken as a duty to look upon every member of the flock by name, even if it should be the meanest servant-man or maid....

²⁵ “On the Importance and Difficulty of the Ministerial Function,” in *The Works of the Rev. Henry Scougal*, ed. Don Kistler (1765; repr. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 241, 252.

A faithful pastor should have his eyes on them all. He should labor to know each person's natural temperament, their situations, and the context of their affairs in the world. A pastor should be aware of the company they live with and deal with, so that he may know where their temptations lie. Thus he knows speedily, prudently, and diligently how to help them.²⁶

In summing up his book, Baxter gives twenty points on the benefits of attending to each individual in the congregation. In this context he makes these statements:

But when a minister does not know his own people, he is not able to really minister to them. By means of such personal ministry we come to be better acquainted with each one's spiritual state. Then we know better how to watch over them and relate to them....

They should see us not as simply necessary for their emergency situations. They should see themselves as disciples or scholars who are being taught by their pastors through personal advice and given help for their salvation."²⁷

Theodore Cuyler (1822–1909), pastor of the largest Presbyterian congregation in the United States in the late nineteenth century, also fully embraced this vision of pastoral ministry. He was concerned enough to inculcate this approach to ministry, that after his retirement he wrote a book, *How To Be a Pastor*, to commend such ministry to young pastors. He urged, "The importance of all that portion of a minister's work that lies *outside of his pulpit* can hardly be overestimated."²⁸ He went on to say:

²⁶ Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 71–72, 76.

²⁷ Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 107–108.

²⁸ Theodore L. Cuyler, *How To Be a Pastor: Wisdom from the Past for Pastors in the Present*, ed. Ray Van Neste and Justin Wainscott (1890; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024), 2.

Of course, if you are a faithful pastor, you will secure a regular visit to every family in your flock once (or oftener), in every year. But extra emergencies demand an extra call promptly. Sudden affliction demands an immediate visit.²⁹

Upon his retirement, Cuyler told his people, “It has been my rule to know everybody in this congregation, if possible, and seldom have I allowed a day to pass without a visit to some of your homes.”³⁰

As a Baptist, let me now include some Baptist voices to show the solidarity of Baptists with this stream of thought.

P.H. Mell (1814–1888) was a delegate at the founding of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the USA, who went on to serve as president of the SBC for fourteen years. Mell was known as a powerful, doctrinal preacher. His biographer records this account of his ministry:

Very much of his power as a preacher lay in the way he had of getting close to his people. His custom was to visit *all* of them, and so anxious were they not to miss the expected pleasure that he made engagements ahead often as far as three months. The humblest householder was glad to entertain “Brother Mell,” and the same ease of manner characterized him whether he sat at the bountiful board of the rich, or broke the plain bread and partook of the cup of milk from the pine table of the poorest.... If a poor man was harassed with debt, broken hearted over a willful child, or bowed down with bereavement, he never felt his load to be quite so heavy after he had talked it over with “Brother Mell.”³¹

Moving to the Northeast, Hezekiah Harvey (1821–1893) was a prolific Baptist pastor and professor at Hamilton Theological

²⁹ Cuyler, *How To Be a Pastor*, 9.

³⁰ Cuyler, *How To Be a Pastor*, 64.

³¹ P.H. Mell, Jr., *The Life of Patrick Hues Mell* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1991), 61–62.

Seminary. In his treatise on pastoral ministry, he wrote:

The care of souls is the radical idea of the pastor's office. He is a shepherd to whom a flock has been committed to guide, to feed, to defend; and the divine command enjoins: "Take heed to *all* the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). He is to be the personal religious guide, the confidential Christian friend, of his charge. Our Lord, in his description of the Good Shepherd, said, "The sheep hear his voice; and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him; for they know his voice" (John 10:3-4). Each member of his flock is a soul entrusted to his care by the Lord; and if true to his trust, he is one of those who "watch for souls as they who must give account." Paul, when in Ephesus, taught not only publicly, but "from house to house;" and in his farewell charge to the elders of that city he said, "Watch, and remember that, by the space of three years, I ceased not to warn every man night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31).³²

Then there is Charles Bray Williams (1869-1952) who was founding New Testament professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, chair of New Testament Interpretation at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and professor of Greek and Ethics at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, where he published his translation of the New Testament. Throughout this work, he was also a pastor. His daughter, Mrs. Charlotte Williams Sprawls has written a biographical sketch of her father where she recollects his pastoral ministry in his later years, in his eighties, when he was pastoring a 700-plus member church. She wrote, "[He] believed strongly

³² Hezekiah Harvey, *The Pastor: His Qualifications and Duties* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1879), 78.

in a pastor's knowing personally every member in his church, and he had a very active plan of visitation of every family in their home every few weeks."³³ That is quite a testimony for a man at that age and a church of that size.

Lastly, I could point to W.A. Criswell (1909–2002), who in his guidebook for pastors writes:

The shepherd tending his flock, the pastor living in love and encouragement among his people, is the picture the New Testament presents of this God-called servant.... Prayer, even fervent prayer, is not enough, nor is prayer plus incessant Bible study enough. We must also live with our people, minister to our people, encourage, and guide our people.... If the pastor would really succeed in his work, let him minister to the needs of his people. ...the pastor who knows, loves, visits, and ministers to his flock has a place in their hearts sacred forever....

The example of the great pastors of the world is always one of personal contact with the people. The pulpit is the throne of the preacher, but the throne is not stable unless it rests on the affections of the people. To win the affections of the people, you must visit with them and know them and talk to them and let them talk to you. The man with whom you have wisely and tenderly conversed on vital, personal religion cannot turn a cold, critical ear toward you on the Lord's Day, nor does he. The man who visits has the love of the people.³⁴

³³ Charlotte Williams Sprawls, *Charles Bray Williams: Greek Scholar, Professor, Writer, Pastor and Preacher, 1896–1952*; Translator of "The New Testament in the Language of the People" (Graceville, FL: Florida Baptist Historical Society, 2007), 12.

³⁴ W.A. Criswell, *Criswell's Guidebook for Pastors* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1980), 273–275.

Conclusion

The oversight of souls is the *heart* of pastoral ministry. From this effort of caring for souls comes preaching, visiting, counselling and everything else a pastor does. We preach in order to guard and guide souls. We pray for them that they might hate sin, love God, be encouraged and persevere. We visit and counsel so that we might point them in the way of truth and that they may overcome the snares of sin. And, while there are various reasons why we pursue personal holiness, one reason is the fear of harming our dear people.

Brothers, let us *shepherd* God's sheep. He bought them with his own blood! Is there anything more valuable, more worthy of our attention? His saving of them was not haphazard or random. Neither should our care of them be.

On the final day, we will be called to give an account before God himself, and he will not inquire of our buildings, programs, etc. He has told us he will examine how we cared for the souls of those entrusted to our care. Let us consider this soberly and pursue our ministries accordingly. This will likely have radical implications for what we do and how we do it. Let us pursue this goal relentlessly, since it is the clear command of our Master, the Great Shepherd of the sheep. Let us imitate him so we might please him and know his pleasure upon our lives.

Fellow pastors, we have been entrusted with a group of people who are feeble and frail, who still struggle with sin and get frightened and overwhelmed. Our task is to guide them faithfully on to heaven, fighting off the wolves, warning of snares, even chasing out false sheep.

Horatius Bonar (1808–1889), that wonderful Scottish pastor, ardent evangelist and hymnwriter said it well:

To this extent the office of the elder and the minister is the same. The design of both is *the oversight of souls*....

Oh! Remember, then, that it is for the care of souls that you have been now ordained; it is for souls that you are to

labour, and watch, and pray; and it is for souls that you are to give an account when the great Shepherd shall appear.³⁵

May we be found faithful in this task.

³⁵ Horatius Bonar, "The Union Between Christ and Believers, and the Union of Believers One With Another: A Discourse," *The Scottish Christian Herald* 2 (Jan.–Dec. 1840): 748.

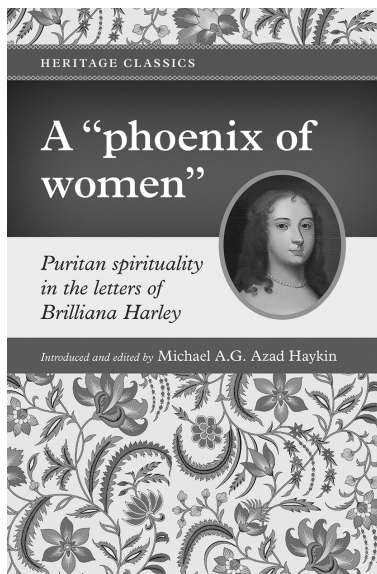
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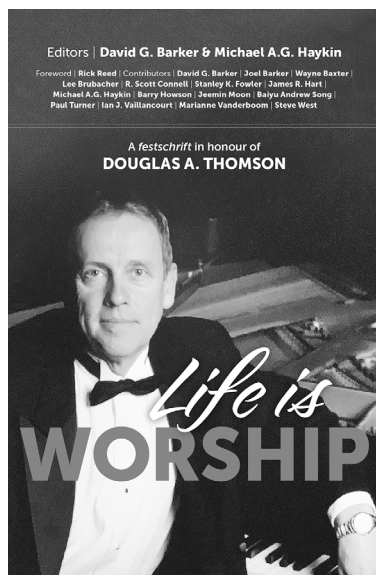
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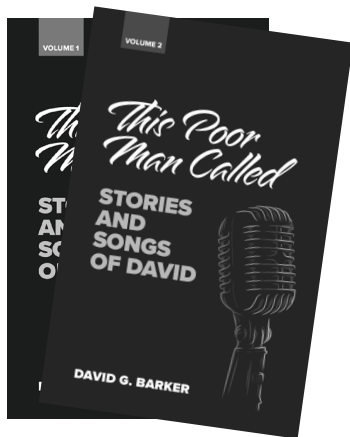
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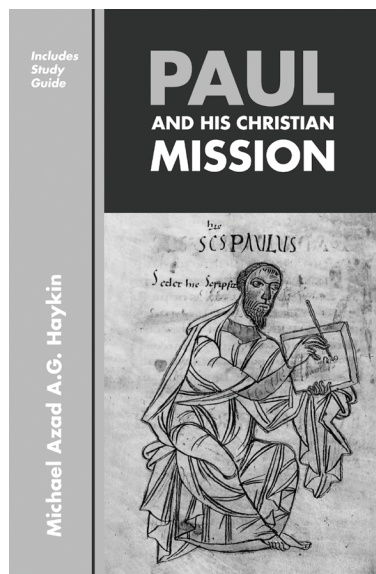
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