

The Heart of a Pastor

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 11, 2022.

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand” (Romans 15:14-21).¹

Paul writes to the Ephesians, “[Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12). While not a comprehensive list of New Testament church offices, Paul reminds us of God’s chosen men and means of equipping and edifying the Beloved. As they are listed, we may be tempted to think of each as mutually exclusive, but that is not the case, and while this is typically the case, it’s not always the case.

For example, it may be argued that Paul held each of these offices. So, in his case each office became a description of his specific ministry. This is the case in other offices as well. For example, regarding the office of elder, our *Book of Church Order* explains,

The man who fills [this office] has in Scripture different titles expressive of his various duties. As he has the oversight of the flock of Christ, he is termed *bishop* or *pastor*. As it is his duty to be grave and prudent, an example to the flock, and to govern well in the house and Kingdom of Christ, he is termed *presbyter* or *elder*. As he expounds the Word, and by sound doctrine both exhorts and convinces the gainsayer, he is termed *teacher*. These titles do not indicate different grades of office, but all describe one and the same office.²

An elder in the Presbyterian Church in America is certainly an elder (or presbyter) but also a pastor (or bishop) as well as a teacher depending upon his duty.

Similarly, Paul was an apostle, called personally by the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, but as an apostle, his duties were varied and expansive, which we see in our passage today. Paul the

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America, 6th Ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: The Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 2013), 8-1.

apostle was also a pastor, concerned for the care and condition of the flock. He is “satisfied” even “proud” of the work God has done through him in Rome, even the miraculous, but his desire is for the continued growth of Christ’s church through the gospel. He is a pastor who knows well the condition of his flock, *and* who knows well there are lost sheep to gather.

The Greek word translated “shepherd” (*poimen*) was being used figuratively by the time of the writing of the New Testament. When John quotes Jesus saying, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), no one thought he meant a literal herdsman. We understand that a shepherd is one who has concern and care for a specific people, a flock. As Christ is our Shepherd, he calls under-shepherds to serve his church.

We are, of course, more familiar with the Latin translation of the word, *pastor*. A *pastor* is a *shepherd*. In the semantic waste land in which we live, many words have lost their specificity, and therefore their significance. But Scripture gives us both specificity and description, such as our passage today, in which one of Christ’s apostles shows us the heart of a pastor.

Called to Ministry

Although not emphasized enough, if at all, in the modern church, every Christian is called to and gifted for ministry (Eph. 4:10-13). As this is from God, we may say that there is no such thing as a secular calling or vocation. In fact, much of Christian ministry happens outside of the church, in our ordinary daily lives. Regardless of your profession, what God has given and gifted us to do, we do to the glory of God for Christ’s sake.

All who are in Christ then are called to serve Christ, but not everyone is called to shepherd the sheep. Every Christian has a ministry, but not every Christian is a minister. Specific to his pastoral calling, Paul was uniquely gifted to teach, as what we could call a teaching elder, by the grace of God “to be a minister of Christ Jesus.” And as God calls a minister, there is specificity. For me, it is Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith; for Paul, it was the Gentiles. Peter’s ministry was different, as was John’s and James’; Paul’s was broader—to the nations. This is not to say that Paul’s ministry excluded the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” (Matt. 15:24), as the Roman church included Jew and Gentile alike. But his calling by Christ was uniquely focused on the lost sheep of the *ethnos*, the Greek word translated “Gentiles” and “nations.”

And so, the breadth of his ministry was wide, as he says, “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum,” but his shepherding was personal. We are the beneficiaries today of a letter that was first sent to the church in Rome personally. We even learn specific names in and serving that church. Paul wasn’t a fill-the-stadium evangelist, although he did once preach to a stadium-filled crowd. He was one who knew the specific needs of each church, which is why for example 1 Corinthians differs significantly from Romans.

To describe his ministry by analogy, Paul draws from the office of the Old Testament priest. Just as the priest ministered before God, presenting animal sacrifices on behalf of God’s covenant people, Paul, through the “service of the gospel of God,” offers up Gentile converts as a sacrifice, so to speak, to God. Of course, Paul is not implying that such a “sacrifice” is significant because of him. It is an act of the sovereign grace of God through the work of the

Holy Spirit. Paul is merely the minister; it is God the Father who acted, God the Son who accomplished, and God the Holy Spirit who applies. And, therefore, such an “offering” is “acceptable” to God the Father through Christ the Son by the Holy Spirit.

This is not only a brilliant analogy of biblical theology it is also a healthy way to think of ministry in the church. Despite the presence of his powerful and persuasive personality, Paul knows that he is merely a doorkeeper in the house of God (Ps. 84:10). May God give our churches pastors like Paul, praying as one Puritan pastor prayed,

Let me learn of Paul
whose presence was mean,
his weakness great,
his utterance contemptible,
yet thou didst account him faithful and blessed.
Lord, let me lean on thee as he did,
and find my ministry thine.³

And may we pray consistently for our pastors.

According to a study conducted in 2021, 38% of pastors considered quitting full-time ministry.⁴ (bu.edu). Another study found pastors suffering from “alarmingly high” levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, levels higher than “post-deployment military personnel.”⁵ While I can’t imagine many pastors encountering what Paul did, such as imprisonments, severe beatings, whippings, shipwrecks, thieves, travel catastrophes, false testimony, alienation, hunger, thirst, and inadequate clothing and shelter (2 Cor. 11:23-27), there are still uniquely modern pressures that lead to burn out and vocational abandonment. Even in our own denomination, I know of three pastors in churches located very close to us who have resigned and left the ministry. We can pontificate on reasons why, but what we must do is pray. Pray for the pastors in the Presbyterian Church in America, as well as your pastors across our land. Pray for their protection, pray for their ministry, and pray that God will raise up men with a pastor’s heart like Paul.

Word and Deed Ministry

Paul is careful about how he describes his pastoral ministry. It’s not about him: “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.” In fact, God used Paul mightily, and in some cases uniquely. But what God accomplished through Paul he did through the ministry of word and deed, speaking and doing as a minister of God.

Of course, there were characteristics of Paul’s ministry that don’t carry over to today. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, an office no longer in existence. Paul worked “signs and wonders, by

³ Arthur Bennett, Ed., *The Valley of Vision* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 341.

⁴ Mara Sassoon and Andrew Thurston, *Why Are So Many Religious Leaders Facing Stress and Burnout?* (Boston University, March 17, 2022), last modified March 17, 2022, accessed September 8, 2022, <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2022/why-are-so-many-religious-leaders-facing-stress-and-burnout/>.

⁵ Ibid.

the power of the Spirit of God,” confirming his apostolic office. And Paul was “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21) to convey and complete the New Testament canon of Scripture. These aspects of Paul’s ministry were unique to the apostolic era, but this does not negate the importance of word and deed ministry today.

For example, by virtue of this ministry, Paul is “satisfied” or “fully convinced” (NET) that the church in Rome is full of goodness, filled with knowledge, and faithfully instructing or admonishing⁶ one another. This doesn’t happen in a church by accident or coincidence. Their “goodness,” or “kindness” or “generosity,”⁷ does not of course imply perfection but a characterization of virtue as a whole. But it’s not as if Paul (with Prisca and Aquila) assembled a group of really nice people. Their goodness is not innate but rooted in and flowing from their knowledge of the Christian faith.

Paul says they are “filled with all knowledge,” not meaning completion or perfection but a comprehensive understanding of the gospel and the Christian faith (Why would Paul even need to write his letter?). Nor were they above reproach, as Paul had particular points that they had forgotten, points not revealed in this letter. But their knowledge was significant enough that they could admonish one another, a beautiful picture of the primacy of the gospel in our relationships with one another.

There is of course a time for pastoral reprimands, but they are always specific and personal. Paul has written to them, in his authority, boldly to remind them. As God has given the minister both authority and commands both obedience and respect, there are times when the minister must tell us things we don’t want to hear. Even the most mature and knowledgeable Christian is not beyond instruction and direction when it is rooted in the Word of God. For, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

As in Word so also in deed, for the pastor’s vocation is not a cloistered career. Paul was a powerful preacher, but he also had “reason to be proud,” to “boast” in his “work for God,” or “things that pertain to God” (NET). As he labored for the church, so the Lord used him “to bring the Gentiles to obedience” through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed is the church whose pastor labors diligently in the ministry of the gospel of Christ.

In the modern church we ask much of our pastors, but are we asking the right things? That which distracts a minister from the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and prayer for the people is to the detriment of the church. But the pastor who labors long in the Word, faithfully administers the sacraments, and prays often and specifically for his flock is blessed and is a blessing to the church. This is where the other shepherds, the ruling elders, are so vital to a church’s health, often protecting the minister from himself and others. A healthy church is a church whose elders actively shepherd the flock.

⁶ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 886.

⁷ Ibid.

Great Commission Ministry

Finally, Paul in his unique pastoral role maintained his zeal for the lost. He says, “I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named.” Yes, the church in Rome needed his pastoral guidance, but the people in Fort Smith, Arkansas needed the gospel. We are the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.” We believe a gospel that was advanced across the world, from Jerusalem to Illyricum to where you heard the gospel for the first time. But Christ’s Great Commission is not yet complete.

And so, with the heart of a pastor, Paul includes the Romans in his missionary endeavors, knowing that a zeal for missions is contagious. Paul also knew that a church that forgets Christ’s commission can quickly translate it into a mere suggestion. Sadly, pastors can lead the way to such complacency. As Richard Lovelace explains,

Pastors gradually settle down and lose interest in being change agents in the church. An unconscious conspiracy arises between their flesh and that of their congregations. It becomes tacitly understood that the laity will give pastors special honor in the exercise of their gifts, if the pastors will agree to leave their congregations’ pre-Christian lifestyles undisturbed and do not call for the mobilization of lay gifts for the work of the kingdom. Pastors are permitted to become ministerial superstars. Their pride is fed and their congregations are permitted to remain herds of sheep in which each has cheerfully turned to his own way.”⁸

Paul will have none of this, and he won’t let the Romans to their own way. Instead, he includes them in his passion and plans to take the gospel “from Jerusalem . . . all the way around to Illyricum” and into all the world. Blessed is the church whose pastor and congregation are united in completing the Great Commission.

May God bless his church with pastors who are truly called, faithful to word and deed ministry, and zealous for the advancement of the gospel from our neighbor to the nations. And may God bless this church with a pastor who, like Paul, has a heart to shepherd the flock to the glory of God.

⁸ Richard Lovelace quoted in C. John Miller, *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 19.