



## An under shepherd

A pastor's first responsibility is for himself. Does that sound like a prescription for professional self-interest? In fact it is precisely the pattern which the apostle Paul advocated when speaking to the elders at Ephesus, and no one could have been more removed from selfish pride or ambition than he. He had no interest in his own comfort, his own welfare or his own security. It is hardly likely that he would have urged on the elders at Ephesus an attitude which he would have repudiated for himself. Yet he begins his commission to them with the plain words *'take heed to yourselves'* (Acts 20:28).

Paul's great concern was the well-being of the flock of God. Paradoxically, this is why he urges the Ephesian elders that their first concern is to be with themselves. For only a pastor who is himself in a healthy spiritual state will be able to help his people. Only the man who is himself listening to the Word of God will be able to pass on that Word to others. The cultivation of his own spiritual life is thus not the selfish exercise of a cloistered piety, but is rather the basic pre-requisite for usefulness to the flock.

The pastor is after all an under shepherd. There is only One who can say with a final authority, *'I am the good shepherd'*. The pastor, no matter how experienced, is never more than a subordinate.

In the benediction in Hebrews 13, Christ is accorded the title *'the great Shepherd'*. He is not one among many. He is above and beyond all others. His authority is supreme. His greatness is unique. His majesty is incomparable. Beside him every other pastor is in a subservient role.

Peter expresses a similar thought when he speaks of Christ as *'the chief Shepherd'* (1 Peter 5:4). The Greek word is literally *'arch-shepherd'*. To him all other shepherds look, for their authority is derived from his. He has commissioned them and to him they are answerable in the discharge of that commission. Again we are back to the basic issue — the pastor's first concern is his own relationship with the Lord.

The pastor must never forget that he shares with every member of the flock the fundamental experience of redemption. He is, like all of them, simply a sinner saved by the sovereign grace of God. The apostle Paul never lost sight of that truth. Towards the end of a life of outstanding usefulness and blessing to many, he could still speak of himself as *'the chief of sinners'*. This continuing realization of our debt to grace is a salutary check to pride, that most subtle of all snares in the work of the ministry. In no other sphere are men more vulnerable to the attacks of the devil. How easily the minister becomes inflated when others acknowledge his abilities in this or that direction! How readily he becomes discouraged if others do not show the appreciation which he feels his gifts deserve! How quickly pride spills over into envy as he sees others whose gifts seem to be greater than his own or who, with apparently less gifts, are seeing a greater measure of blessing on their ministry!

What fools we are that we preen ourselves on our own gifts and attainments!

*'What have you', asks Paul, 'that you did not receive?'* (1 Corinthians 4:7).

If God has placed us in the ministry it is because he first stooped to the gutter of sin and lifted us to set us on the King's highway. If we have gifts it is because God in His sovereign providence allocated those gifts to us. If we are in a sphere of some influence it is the same gracious providence which has placed us there.

Allied to this realization of our indebtedness to the mercy of God is a glad thankfulness that God has been so gracious to us. In spite of our sinfulness Christ died for us. So we sing *'Amazing Grace'* and we return to our tasks as those who are so moved to praise by the grace of God that we are impelled by a driving urge to discharge our debt of gratitude by glad and willing service.

Another basic element in the minister's life should be a readiness to share in the sufferings of the great Shepherd. Our Christ was the suffering servant of Jehovah, and faced, with a sensitive anticipation, the unfolding pattern of pain which culminated at Calvary. At the same time he reminded his disciples that the servant is not greater than his master (Matthew 10:24). If the Master faced scornful rejection by the world and all the suffering and pain which his ministry required from him the disciples could expect no less. In similar vein Paul urged the young converts in Pisidia to be true to the faith — *'we must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God'* (Acts 14:22).

Yet for Paul, suffering was not one of the uncomfortable accompaniments of discipleship which had to be borne. It was rather part of the goal which he set before himself. Writing to the Philippians he outlines the dominant aim of his life. It was to know Christ. With all his concern to spread the gospel and to build up the churches, his overriding desire was to know Christ in an ever deeper way. But to know Christ meant knowing not only *'the power of his resurrection'* but also *'the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death'* (Philippians 3:10). When the minister of the Word knows loneliness of spirit or discouragement, misunderstanding or misrepresentation, when he encounters hostility or sheer apathy, when the burden seems almost unbearable, at such times he must realize that such experiences are not intended to lead him to despair or to wild thoughts of abandoning his ministry. Rather they are the means which his Father uses to bring him into close communion with the great Shepherd of the sheep.

### **Reflecting the great Shepherd**

Paul urges the Corinthians *'Be imitators of me as I am of Christ'* (1 Corinthians 11:1). He spoke of himself as an ambassador for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). We too are the Kings' representatives. His honour is in our hands. Men do not see Christ but they see us. The solemn issue for us is this — Do they see no more than us? Do they hear no more than our voices? Worse still — does what we say or what we are, obscure the Christ whom we profess to present? If our pastoring is to be effective, if our preaching is to be fruitful, we must by life and lip at every point reflect the glory of the great Shepherd.

The Chief Shepherd is the second Person of the Trinity. He is therefore essentially *holy*. Nor did he lay his holiness aside when he took our nature. He was veiled in flesh. He laid his glory by. But he did not lay aside his holiness. It was as the incarnate One that he was *'holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners'* (Hebrews 7:26). It is a sobering thought that we — with our indwelling sinfulness, with our sad inconsistencies, with our failure to react alright to some of the stresses and pressures of the ministry — that we are to be a mirror in which men should see without grievous distortion the holiness of the Lord Jesus.

Christ is also the *gracious* Shepherd. He came to die for those who deserved only condemnation. Firmly but gently he draws them to himself. Even the pain of his rebukes is tempered by the gentleness with which he does his convicting work.

*'A bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.'*

(Isaiah 42:3, Matthew 12:20)

He imposes a controlling yoke upon his disciples, but the yoke does not chafe for it is lined with love. It is this gracious and gentle approach which is to be reflected in the life of the pastor.

Men and women live in a harsh world. They are introduced at an increasingly early age to the rat race of modern society in which there is a continuing scramble to keep ahead. It is the world of the ruthless takeover of the small firm by the big corporation with its impersonal dismissal of what is viewed as surplus labour. The bitterness of sudden redundancy and prolonged unemployment are

harsh realities. In such a situation people who have been deeply wounded in spirit need the healing ministry of Christ and that ministry should be found, not only in the preaching of the great biblical themes of comfort and consolation, but in the pastor's gracious and gentle concern for them.

Such a responsibility brings at once a sobering realization of how far short most of us fall. To speak of the gentleness required from the minister of the Word is to be rebuked for our own brusqueness and irritability, our insensitivity and our stubborn dogmatism. We push ahead with plans and claim to be carrying our principles to what we believe to be their logical conclusion when at times we are simply brushing aside the sensitivities of others, and forgetting that we serve a God who like a father 'pities his children'. Paul shows us a better way as he recalls how he himself acted:

*'We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.'*

(1 Thessalonians 2:7)

There is a stern note in God's Word. Men certainly need to hear the thunder of God's wrath. But they must also hear the quiet voice of his gentleness and his comfort. A balanced preaching ministry does not harp on one theme or overstress one aspect of the truth. The great Welsh preacher of the eighteenth century, Daniel Rowlands, had to learn this lesson. In his early ministry such was the powerful impact of his preaching that men and women were overwhelmed with conviction of sin. Something however was lacking and his friend and mentor Philip Pugh put his finger on the failure and pointed to a better way: *'Preach the gospel to the people, but apply the balm of Gilead, the blood of Christ, to their spiritual wounds'*. Such preaching however requires not only a gracious presentation of the truth but a warmly compassionate attitude on the part of the preacher.

Allied to Christ's gentleness was his forbearance in face of provocation. *'When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate, when he suffered he made no threats'* (1 Peter 2:22). *'He was oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth'* (Isaiah 53:7). Certainly there was every justification for an angry outburst against the brutal injustice to which he was subjected. Yet he remained quietly submissive in face of the insults and ill treatment. By contrast we so easily react to unjust criticism or misrepresentation. How readily we resort to indignant self-justification or even to the vitriolic counter-attack either by word or by letter! It is fellowship with the great Shepherd which will guard us against such reactions. It is his example and the inner strength which he gives which will enable us to be forbearing when every fibre of our being is tense with indignation.

Not only was Christ patient in face of provocation by men; he was patient in another sense in face of the pressure of events, and of the failures or weakness of others. There was a serenity of spirit as with a quietly calm assurance he went forward to fulfil his ministry. He was never in a rush. There was no hint of the feverish concern which so often grips us if things are not developing as quickly as we had expected or if people from whom we had hoped to see a response have disappointed us. He was certainly ready to rebuke his disciples, as he did when they were so blind to the implications of his miracles of feeding the crowds. His rebuke could be very severe, as it was when Peter's self-assured advice was silenced at Caesarea Philippi. At the same time he was amazingly patient with them, correcting, guiding, encouraging, directing, and always with that quietness of spirit which so marked his ministry.

To speak like this of the patience of Christ is to be forced to reflect on our own impatience. When people fail to see what to us seems so plain; when they are slow to accept what we believe we have presented so clearly from the Scriptures; when the surge of blessing which we long to see in the life of the congregation seems long in coming; when these or a variety of other hindrances appear like checks to our ministry, how impatient we are. How edgy we become in our reactions! How often there is a feeling of rush and bustle rather than of spiritual calm and steady persistence! We need to learn from the Chief Shepherd the meaning of the peace of God which passes all understanding and which will guard our hearts and minds (Philippians 4:7).

## **Responsible to the great Shepherd**

The minister is answerable to his fellow elders with whom he shares the oversight of the congregation. He is also responsible to the congregation. His ultimate responsibility, is however, to the Lord. So Paul writes to the Corinthians:

*'I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.'*

(1 Corinthians 4:3-4)

He may satisfy the requirements of his congregation. After all they do not know his inner motives. They do not see whether he is hardworking in his study or whether he fritters away his time. They do not know whether his public insistence on the importance of prayer is reflected in his own prayer life. They cannot tell whether the fervency of his preaching matches his own personal devotion. The more discerning may well detect the spiritual lack and recognize the absence of a vital dimension of living reality in his preaching. But for the majority, especially in a shallow and television-controlled age such as ours is, they will tend to see the eloquent preacher, the busy pastor, the successful organizer as a man who is all that a pastor should be.

He may even satisfy himself, especially if he does not set the standard too high. This does not necessarily result from deliberate dishonesty or from an attempt to excuse known failure. It can emerge from a continuing process of rationalizing facts which are not palatable. A man may excuse his lack of prayer or Bible study by the pressure of work. He may persuade himself that he has reached a condition of spiritual maturity by ignoring the insistent calls of Scripture which are always beckoning us to new heights. He may even read the biographies of great men of God and argue to himself that they are in a different class, while at the same time he shuts his eyes to the fact that while their gifts were special, their holiness, diligence and love for Christ should be the aim of every minister and indeed of every believer. Such rationalizing can lead to a state of complacency which is deepened if the life of the congregation is developing fairly smoothly and there is some evidence of numerical growth. Such complacency and self-congratulation are, however, not only a deadening influence on a man's ministry, they are utterly abhorrent to the Lord.

The ultimate issue remains — is he pleasing the Head of the church? Is the Great Shepherd satisfied with the way the flock is being tended? His is a scrutiny which cannot be avoided. A man may evade it now by retreating behind the façade of his own excuses. He must however face it ultimately in the solemn confrontation on what Paul describes tersely as *'the Day'* (1 Corinthians 3:13). It will be the day when the Lord will expose all that is tawdry and second-rate. The right foundation for life may be laid, and because Christ is the basis on which the building has been erected, there will be no condemnation. A man may however survive that fiery judgment as far as his eternal salvation is concerned, while his work may fail to pass the test.

*'It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.'*

(1 Corinthians 3:13-15)

## **Strengthened by the great Shepherd**

In face of all the searching demands — the call to reflect the glory of the Lord in all his grace, holiness and love, the challenge to persist with steady faithfulness to the end — the pastor might well echo Paul's question, *'Who is equal to such a task?'* Paul's answer is however still the answer of faith: *'Our competence comes from God'* (2 Corinthians 2:16; 3:5). When the Lord gave his great commission to his disciples he accompanied it with the assurance that he would be with them until the end of the age. He required much from them but pledged himself to their support.

The gift of the Holy Spirit was the gift of the ascended Lord. He had earlier given a word of reassurance to his disciples as he spoke of his coming departure. They would inevitably feel uncertainty about the future. How would they fare in his absence? How could they face the future without the steadying influence of his continuing companionship? His answer to such questioning was a word of promise:

*'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you'* (John 14:18).

That promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost and its consequences have been experienced by the church ever since.

The Spirit gives gifts to the people of God. The term *charisma* means a gracious gift and the gifts of the Spirit, the *charismata*, are the endowments by which each member in the body of Christ is enabled to fulfil the responsible task of building up fellow members.

It is in this context of the gift of the Spirit and the bestowal by the Spirit of gifts on each Christian that we are to view what Paul has to say in Ephesians 4. There he contends that the ministry in its various aspects is the gift of the ascended Lord. This means that it is associated with the outpouring of the Spirit and the purpose of building up the church. So the purpose God has in view in giving gifts to men to minister his word is *'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'* (Ephesians 4:12).

Timothy is reminded of the same truth. He may well have felt hesitant in face of the tasks Paul outlines for him. He is however reminded that in his ordination to the ministry the Spirit had been active. His call therefore is not to a fresh effort to muster some resources of his own. Rather is he called *'to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands'* (2 Timothy 1:6).

The pastor not only has the commission of the great Shepherd with all its overwhelming implications, he has the promise of strength sufficient for each task. By himself he is helpless and despairing. But God's word cuts through the mists of fear and uncertainty.

*'I can do everything through him who gives me strength'* (Philippians 4:13).

## **Final vindication**

The ministry can be an intensely lonely experience. It can also be a deeply painful one. Criticism or misunderstanding, apathy or hostility are hard to bear. When the apostle Paul had listed many personal sufferings in the work of the gospel he put alongside the scourging, stoning and beating, the humiliation when he escaped from Damascus. To the erstwhile Pharisee it was a sorry blow to his pride to be smuggled over the wall in a laundry basket. The harsh criticism he received in Corinth was also very painful — as painful, judged by the tone of his second letter, as the physical hardships of his ministry. To a sensitive man who instinctively wants to be accepted by others it can be deeply painful to suffer for the sake of the truth.

It is against this background that the final vindication of the people of God at the second coming of Christ is such a steadying truth. Peter, as he urges the pastors to face the difficulties of feeding the flock, reminds them of the promise;

*'When the Chief Shepherd appears you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.'*

(1 Peter 5:4)

Paul has the same confident assurance as he writes to the Colossians: *'Your life is now hidden with Christ in God'* — so men do not recognize who you are, nor do they accept your testimony — but *'when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory'* (Colossians 3:3-4). It is the same message from Christ in John's letter to the suffering church in Smyrna, and especially to the messenger of the church who would bear the brunt of the persecution there:

*'Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.'*

(Revelation 2:10)

Paul's own testimony as he prepares for martyrdom reinforces this hope of final vindication. Let men say what they will. Let the world do with us what it will. The Great Shepherd has himself gone in front and tasted suffering and death itself. He has been rejected, but the day of his triumph is approaching. It will be the day when he will be openly vindicated before an unbelieving world and *'every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord'*. It will be also the day for the vindication of the servants of God. So Paul declares his triumphant confidence:

*'Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness,  
which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day —  
and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.'*

(2 Timothy 4:8)

Herbert Carson

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