

# The biblical role of the pastor

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Ministry, April 2009

What does the pastor do? Is there a job description? Is there a *biblical* job description? When I graduated from the seminary and went to my first church, I asked several seasoned pastors these questions. One answered, “Just go out there and make the people happy.” Another encouraged me to visit, visit, and visit more. Another one felt that the main role of the pastor is to bring new people to the church.

According to the Scriptures, though, what should the pastor do? Do we have a model in the Scriptures that might help us understand the role?

After many years of observation and careful examination of the literature, I found two distinctive pastoral roles: the traditional and the contemporary.

## The traditional and contemporary roles of the pastor

For many centuries, people viewed the role of the pastor as a servant caregiver who does the following:

1. Teaching/preaching of traditional doctrine
2. Caregiving, such as visitation, counseling, comforting, and taking care of the needs of people
3. Performing rites of passage, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals
4. Administration, such as taking care of meetings, putting together a bulletin, and developing programs for the church and evangelism
5. And finally, serving as ambassador of the church to the community

People expect pastors to do this, and pastors also view their role in this way. Actually, pastors did this for many centuries.

But around the 1970s and 1980s, a new understanding started to emerge. Many book authors and pastors of megachurches started to see the role of the pastor as a chief executive officer (CEO/leader), who casts a vision and rallies and motivates people to carry on the new vision in a changed and healthy environment.

Most books on church growth and leadership today argue that if pastors continue to do what pastors have done for so many years, they will fail. Greg Ogden, in *Unfinished Business*,<sup>1</sup> proposes that the pastor should be a visionary leader who constantly builds other leaders, casts the vision, and changes the culture and structure of the church, while doing all of this with an eye for mission, evangelism, and growth.

However fresh, insightful, and useful, both these ideas are weak theologically. The old model of a servant caregiver does not lend itself to growth, but creates a culture of people dependent upon the pastor, a role utterly inconsistent with the biblical principles of the priesthood of all believers. It also encourages people to focus on their needs and thus

hinders the growth of the kingdom of God.

The new model of a CEO/leader combines a mixture of some biblical insights and adaptation of business practices. Most of the church growth books are basically books about leadership models adapted to the church.

But, many dangers lurk behind this model. First, it might lead people to follow a charismatic personality rather than biblical principles. Second, this new model also focuses on the needs of the local church to the exclusion of the global church. The emphasis of this model, and this should be noted, becomes the building of a megachurch rather than building a healthy church. Finally, any model we adapt needs biblical and theological development. The role of the pastor should be based on a biblical model and have a strong theological foundation.

So, then, what are we to do as pastors?

The answer can be found in the ministry of Jesus. The New Testament account reveals that Jesus did five things: (1) Jesus built His relationship with His Father, (2) He preached the gospel of the kingdom of God, (3) He met the needs of people, (4) He made disciples through the power of the Spirit, and (5) He gave His life as a sacrifice. These are the keys to true biblical ministry.

### **Relationship with the Father**

Over and over, the Scriptures show us that Jesus placed the highest priority of His life on spending time alone with the Father. His life reveals an intense passion for the presence of God. His heart longed and hungered to touch the heart of God.

Note the following incidents:

- “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God” (Luke 6:12).<sup>2</sup>
- “After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone” (Matt. 14:23).
- “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35).

Jesus lived a life of prayer. He started every day in communion with the heavenly Father. He ended every day in close relationship with His Father. At times, He even spent the whole night in communion with His Father. Jesus actually was in touch with His heavenly Father all the time.

The first thing that Jesus did each day was to fill the well of His being with the presence of His Father; He then lived with heaven in mind all day long. He managed His time by moving from being to behaving. His being was about being in union with the Father and experiencing the joy of His Sonship. And His doing was about doing the will of the Father. This made His doing so effective as He received grace and power from the Father.

*In Steps to Christ*, Ellen White said, “His humanity made prayer a necessity and a privilege. He found comfort and joy in communion with His Father. And if the Saviour of men, the Son of God, felt the need of prayer, how much more should feeble, sinful mortals feel the necessity of fervent, constant prayer.”<sup>3</sup> Ellen White, in the same book, also admonishes us to start every day with prayer.

Consecrate yourself to God in the morning; make this your very first work. Let your prayer be, “Take me, O Lord, as wholly Thine. I lay all my plans at Thy feet. Use me today in Thy service. Abide with me, and let all my work be wrought in Thee.” This is a daily matter. Each morning consecrate yourself to God for that day. Surrender all your plans to Him, to be carried out or given up as His providence shall indicate. Thus day by day you may be giving your life into the hands of God, and thus your life will be molded more and more after the life of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

When the pastor lives a life of prayer like Jesus and becomes intentional about discipleship and spiritual formation, God will use them to transform the church into a sanctuary for spiritually transformed lives. Jesus said, “ ‘ “My house will be called a house of prayer” ’ ” (Matt. 21:13). He did not say that His church should be a place of singing or preaching or doing ministry, however important these things may be. The church is about leading people to the throne of grace to experience the presence of God and receive power from Him. Unfortunately, too many technicians have invaded the church with programs and ideas and turned it into a human institution rather than the living body of Christ. When we live a life of connectedness with the heavenly Father, the church becomes a sanctuary of prayer, grace, and the dwelling of the presence of God.

Jesus’ hunger for the presence of God should be our motivation and inspiration to be more and more like Him.

### **Preach the gospel**

Jesus often preached, proclaiming a message of God’s love. In describing His earthly mission, Jesus said, in Luke 4:18, “ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me / to preach good news to the poor.’ ” Also, Matthew 9:35 says, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom.” Jesus taught the people every day, giving guidance through the Word and calling them to confess their sins and to experience a transformed life.

The ministry of the Word always leads people to transformed lives. There is power in the Word. The word of God brought this world into existence. The word brought Jesus Christ from the grave. And the Word brings us back to spiritual health and meaningful change.

From an early age, Jesus developed passionate love for the Scriptures. He learned them and taught them with power and authority (Luke 2:46–50). His love for the Father motivated Him to read His Book and learn about His will.

The pastor should always lead people to a better understanding of the Word of God. Notice the following vital spiritual things that the Word does for us.

- God’s Word gives us life (Phil. 2:16).
- God’s Word can make us righteous (1 Cor. 15:1, 2).
- God’s Word can produce growth (1 Pet. 2:2).
- God’s Word sanctifies us (John 17:7).
- God’s Word gives us wisdom (Ps. 119:98).

So often we reduce Scripture to mere information. Paul reminds us that the Scriptures give us a new life in Jesus. Paul’s command to Timothy urged him to give careful attention to the public reading and preaching (expounding) of the Scriptures (1 Tim. 4:13). In his second

epistle, he reminds Timothy that the whole of Scripture is divinely inspired and therefore profitable for “teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

It is not theoretical knowledge you need so much as spiritual regeneration. You need not to have your curiosity satisfied, but to have a new heart. You must receive a new life from above before you can appreciate heavenly things. Until this change takes place, making all things new, it will result in no saving good for you to discuss with Me My authority or My mission.<sup>5</sup>

It's time to stop rehearsing what we believe and start looking at what difference it makes. We need spiritual renewal more than knowledge. We must study the Bible, not for curiosity, but for a new heart. That encapsulates the essence of the power of the Word. Jesus did not preach sociology, politics, or psychology; He always preached the Word. For this reason, He had power and authority.

### **Meet the needs of the people**

Often the Bible says that Jesus, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). Jesus loved people. He knew that lost people matter to God, therefore, lost people mattered to Him.

Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, “Follow Me.”<sup>6</sup>

Christ's method builds relationships and meets needs. The first thing Jesus did was to mingle with people, desiring their good. By doing so, He touched their hearts. The second thing Jesus did was to show sympathy for them. The way He did this was that He met them at their daily vocations and manifested an interest in their secular affairs. The third thing that He did was to win their confidence. When we build a relationship, when the needs are met, and when the heart is touched, then we bid people to follow Jesus.

Notice the progressive steps that Christ took in witnessing: He started by mingling with people and ended up calling them to be disciples.

### **Making disciples**

As soon as He began His public ministry, Jesus began to call disciples. He called and empowered twelve men to be His disciples— twelve men who would champion His evangelistic cause. As Robert Coleman says in *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, “His concern was not with programs to reach the multitudes, but with men whom the multitudes would follow. . . . Men were to be His method of winning the world to God.”<sup>7</sup>

The wisdom of His method centered in the fundamental principle of concentration upon those men whom He intended to use to transform the world, not programs, and not the masses. Theologically speaking, this has always been the methodology of Jesus. Jesus challenged His disciples for this reason by saying, “ ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field’ ” (Luke 10:2).

Jesus basically says that we have a math problem. We need more workers, more disciples, to gather the harvest, so go and make disciples. Our role is to pray for the harvest and

especially for harvesters.

God's role is to send us people who will be the new harvesters.

The need to build disciples is so fundamental that Jesus spent three and a half years in full-time discipleship formation. In fact, if Jesus had not built His disciples, there would not be a church today.

### **A life of service and sacrifice**

There are two important truths about Christ. First, He was a Servant Leader. Any study of Christian leadership is incomplete unless we study the servant sacrificial life of Christ. “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve” ([Mark 10:45](#), MLB). “I am among you as one who serves” ([Luke 22:27](#), MLB). The King of the whole universe was not into self-glorification, self-satisfaction, power, or control. He was into service and ministry.

The second truth about Jesus is that He gave His life as a living sacrifice; to redeem us, Jesus lived and suffered and died. In the agony of Gethsemane, the death at Calvary, God paid the price of our redemption. In fact, the price paid for our redemption, the infinite price paid by God the Father in sending His Son to die on our behalf, should give us an idea of just how valuable we are to God. Jesus declared, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” ([Luke 19:10](#)). Lost people matter to God. Thus, if I am to be a genuine pastor and disciple of Jesus Christ, then lost people will matter to me as well. The pastor's role is to instill this value in the heart of their congregation.

This sacrificial life manifests itself on at least two levels. The first level is to live a life of giving—of time, of resources, and of life. The second level is to give our lives in sacrificial giving, even to death.

God calls us to live the life Jesus lived. Pastoral ministry is not about us, but about Him—about knowing and serving Him.

### **Conclusion**

So what does the pastor do?

First and foremost, we need to deepen our relationship with the Father through prayer that results in an intimate relationship with Him. Then we will be able to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God and build leaders to take care of the needs of the people. Authentic leadership in the church is about servant leadership. Jesus came to serve and not to be served. He came to offer His life as sacrifice. He calls us to do the same.

1 Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

2 Unless otherwise noted, all texts quoted are from the NIV.

3 Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1908), 94.

4 Ibid., 70.

5 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1898), 171.

6 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1942), 143.

7 Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1963), 21.