

Pastoral Theology and Practice: Personal Reflections

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Introduction

Scripture urges an unequivocal call of scripture to all believers, not just clergy or Christian professionals, to care for others. This paper affirms existing pastoral activities in the home, church or community, but aims to stimulate an even deeper commitment to a love for and knowledge of God, the creation, the self and humanity.

My reflections are shaped by an upbringing in a clergy home, my own sinfulness, and ongoing biblical study. While grateful for an evangelical heritage and Reformational theological college, my graduate studies helped bridge a disturbing gap between scripture and culture, with Bible as a lens through which to understand God and society. My own interaction with Christian thinkers has played a more formative role than church worship, sermons and music.

I've been challenged firstly, by Jeremiah's criticism of the religious leaders of Judah:

The priests did not say, "Where is the Lord?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the shepherds transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal and went after things that do not profit (2:8).

Secondly, by Jesus's frustration with contemporary religious leaders:

You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but cannot interpret the signs of the times (Matt. 16:3).

Thirdly, by Christ's call of the twelve:

to be with him (Companionship), and to be sent out to proclaim (Gk. kerussein) the message (Communication) and to have authority to cast out demons and to cure every disease (Confrontation) - Mark 3:14f, Matt. 10:1.

Anyone seeking to nurture disciples of Jesus might reflect on these provocative statements. If scripture is a sharp sword calling for a change of heart, mind and life (Heb. 4:12), too much evangelical preaching does more to comfort than admonish: to explain scripture, but not life.

It was in my loneliness as an undergraduate away from home, and through the support of a caring pastor, that I read *Search the Scriptures*¹ and sensed God's intimacy and love. It was only after a year at theological college, with its cerebral approach to everything, that I read the *Psalms* and Calvin's *Institutes* devotionally,

¹ <https://www.ivpress.com/search-the-scriptures> .

which lifted me out of a disconnected faith. An older friend and earlier graduate of the same institution shouldered me through the remainder of my training there.

Pastors often experience, among encouragements, a good deal of pain, disappointment and frustration, which explains why many are leaving the ministry or are burnt out. Some were never cut out for an integrated approach to pastoring and teaching, lacking adequate emotional intelligence.

Reflections on parenting, ministry and mission work in Asia and Africa can lead to a sense that our toil has often been in vain. Observing God's interest in and care for us and the creation reminds us that the way of the Cross inevitably involves suffering, troubles and heartache, mixed with joy and satisfaction.

This was certainly the case for Moses (Numbers 11:11-15), Jesus and the early church. The call to costly discipleship has been muffled today by the consumer-driven thirst for the good life.

God's pastoral interest and care are reflected in the visits to Adam and Eve in the garden and to the enslaved people of Israel in Egypt (Exod. 3:7f):

I have observed the misery of my people ... and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians

in the regular call:

Don't be afraid for I am with you, ... I am your God (Isa. 41:10)

and in the care of the Good Shepherd (Ezekiel 34, John 10), who seeks the lost, binds up the wounded, feeds the hungry and lays down his life for the sheep.

The apostle James reflects both the prophetic and wisdom traditions:

religion that is pure and undefiled before God ... is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (1:27).

Throughout our marriage my wife and I have opened our home to needy and often wounded people. Though costly, we take God's word seriously. With this background, we turn to some seminal parts of the Bible.

Scriptural Clues

A reader might well expect a focus on the gospels and epistles for pointers to the nature and practice of pastoral ministry – the ministry of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount or Paul's spiritual gifts and 'one

another's'² - to which all believers are called. We begin, however, with the creation narrative and its pointers to 'ministry'³ and pastoral care.

Order from chaos, light from darkness (Gen.1: 1-4). Into the formlessness and chaos ('an uninhabitable waste'), God brought order and light, suggesting that only God's word or wisdom can dispel our confusion and lostness. In helping anyone deal with shame, doubt or fear, we must always seek God's light and truth as a filter for other human suggestions. It was only after Adam and Eve listened to an alien voice that sin entered their world (Gen.3:1, 'Did God actually say?'), whereas ten times in the opening chapter, the repeated refrain is, 'God said ... and it was so'.

Created in God's image for relationship, discovery, work and rest (Gen. 1:26-28, 2:3). The trinitarian hint in the words 'let us' (1:26, 'like one of us', 3:22; cf. Isa. 6:8), and in the meaning of 'image and likeness of God', suggests that God wants to share life with humans in a way that reflects God's own nature, shown through God's interest at the cool of the day in their work (3:8). My own pattern with intentional friendship is to pose questions about these four dimensions of human activity, often asking Jeremiah's question ('Where is the Lord?') as the basis for discussion. With 'discovery', for example, I might ask, 'What are you learning about God, yourself, your relationships, the world?' With 'rest', I may ask, 'How do you balance priorities (work, exercise, sleep, diet, family) so as to make worship central?'

Maleness and femaleness suggest oneness of purpose, yet difference, as equal partners and stewards of the earth, commissioned and blessed by a wise and benevolent Creator. The Hebrew word *ebed* in Gen. 2: 15 ('tend and guard' the garden), has both secular (work) and sacred (serve) connotations, indicating how such projects are sacred. The word 'servant' is often used of a person accountable to a superior: 'my servant Abraham' (Gen. 26:24). The word can mean 'tend', work or 'cultivate' (soil) - whence 'culture'. If 'serve', then working the earth and economic production are acts of devotion, and must never be exploitative or self-serving. Butcher, baker and candlestick-maker alike have sacred tasks⁴. The poet John Milton found comfort

² <https://www.mmlearn.org/hubfs/docs/>; <https://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>. E.g. Gal. 5: 13, 'through love serve one another'; Eph. 5:21, 'be subject to one another'; Gal.6: 2, 'bear one another's burdens', or his pastoral prayer for the Philippians (1:3-11). Dr. Bill Walker suggested that applying the idea of Jesus as 'the way, the truth and the life' to a unifying pastoral strategy might be another pathway into this discussion. Over-emphasising truth, as many evangelical churches tend to do, is often at the expense of 'practising his way and experiencing the abundant life Jesus came for' .. where truth itself 'is personal and found in Jesus.'

³ The NT use of the Greek *diakonia* encompasses the call to serve the poor and oppressed. Its root meaning is acting as a go-between, referring to a wide variety of practical and spiritual tasks that many different people, not just the first apostles of Jesus, do in service to the Christian communities. Note Gal. 2:10's call by James, Cephas and John for Paul 'to remember the poor'.

⁴ 'A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops', Martin Luther, *An Open Letter to The Christian Nobility* (1483-1546). 'The number of pages theologians have devoted to the question of transubstantiation—which does or does not take place on Sunday—for instance, would, I suspect, far exceed the number of pages devoted to work that fills our lives Monday through Saturday', Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: A Theology of Work* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 69.

and hope even in blindness: ‘God doth not need either man's work or his own gifts: who best bear his mild yoke, they serve him best ...They also serve who only stand and wait’⁵.

The word *shamar* (guard, keep) is used again in Gen. 3: 24 to refer to the cherubim and flaming sword God placed in Eden ‘to guard the way to the tree of life’, protecting God’s temple-garden from harmful intrusions. Adam and Eve were supposed to be caretakers of a lush forest, with its river, fruit trees and wild life. The serpent should have been banished, not welcomed by the primal couple. Later on, the Korahite gatekeepers of the Temple enforced the death penalty on trespassers in the house of God. They had responsibility (*shamar*: ‘watching over’, ‘guardians’ of its security, 1 Chron. 9: 19, 27).

Cain’s sarcastic reply to God’s question, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ (i.e., the shepherd, v.2), is ‘Am I my brother’s keeper or protector (*shamar*)’ – to shepherd the shepherd? Pastoral ministry involves guarding the ‘flock’ from evil or danger – a key parental role, but with broader application.

Parents as nurturers and gatekeepers passing on the faith. Parenting is a priestly-pedagogical or pastoral task that is often neglected by churches:

- i. Gen.18:19 – God called Abraham to command his children and household to guard (*shamar*) the way of the Lord by practising what is right and just, thereby fulfilling God’s promises. Note the connection between talking and modelling: children aren’t fooled if they don’t observe their parents walking the talk. Jesus was the Word incarnate who ‘became flesh and dwelt (lit. tabernacled, encamped) among us and we have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14). The work of equipping saints for service and thus building up mature Christians (Eph.4:12, Col.1:28), must give far higher priority to parental, alongside kids’ or youth formation. After all, from birth upward, parents spend most time with their children – not clergy or Sunday School teachers - and need mentoring.
- ii. Deut. 6:4-9 – Parents must drill their children in the scriptures⁶. It’s not a hit or miss task, but has a clear intentionality – an unremitting process of education, through a series of opposites: sit/walk (being at rest/active), lie down/get up. Love for God is a full time, every circumstance project⁷. A clergy friend wrote: ‘I found it interesting to learn that in the Church of England, it was normal practice in the 17th century for the father to discuss, teach and inquire of his family, including servants, the content of the morning’s sermon after Sunday lunch.’⁸ Most sermons today are forgotten after coffee, unless people discuss in a small group or forum.

Shepherding. At the time of the judges, ‘there was no king (*melek*) in Israel, [so] all the people did what was right in their own eyes’ (Judges 21:25). They clamoured for a king ‘like other nations’ (1 Sam. 8:5). Despite

⁵ <https://www.owleyes.org/text/on-his-blindness/read/text-poem>.

⁶ The Shema here was the foundational principle of the Ten Commandments, the essence of God’s covenant with Israel, pointing out the nature of God and the need for a deeply ingrained heart response.

⁷ See also Ps. 78:3-8, Eph. 6:4, 2 Tim. 1:5, 3:14f: handing on the tradition to the next generation includes grandparents.

⁸ Revd. Dr. Robert Ireland, March 10th, 2025.

Samuel's objections, subsequent rulers, with few exceptions, proved failures. David, however, grew up as a shepherd, protecting sheep from danger - a man 'after God's own heart' (1 Sam.13:14, Acts 13:22). Yet even he was reprimanded by the prophet Nathan via a shepherding parable (2 Sam. 12). The word 'shepherd' (*roeh*) was a 'common ancient Near Eastern metaphor of a king as shepherd of the people'⁹: 'Saul was king (*melek*) over us ... The Lord said you (David) shall be shepherd (*roeh*) of my people ... ruler/leader¹⁰ (*nagid*) over Israel' (2 Sam.5:2).

The prophets were critical of most Israelite rulers, David a deeply flawed exception. Ezekiel's condemnation is savage (Ezek. 34), but pointing ahead to the Good Shepherd (John 10: 1-18, 27-29) who would lay down his life for the sheep (1 Peter 2:25 - Jesus the 'shepherd and guardian (bishop) of your souls'). Note the link between 'shepherds [pastors] (*poimenas*) and teachers (*didaskalous*)' in Eph.4:11¹¹. Clergy formation should give priority to *both* functions, testing background, personality type, skills and experience in candidates before commencement.

To teach and admonish one another, for Paul, is the task of the whole community (Col.1:28). Warning aims at repentance and teaching at faith, producing insight and wisdom (maturity) gained from the gospel.¹² Admonishing can mean correcting error, instruction, accountability and mutual encouragement. Maturity (*teleios*) is grounded in the outworking of God's purposes through union with Christ: 'actualisation of the redemption in Christ in personal and corporate Christian living.'¹³

Mentoring and discipling. When the Creator strolled through Eden (Gen.3:8), he revealed his nature as relational, interested in the everyday lives and work of his creatures – God with and for us along the journey. Moses had this unique relationship with God who used to speak to him 'face to face, as one speaks to his friend' (Exod. 33:11). Jesus called the twelve to be with him, to proclaim¹⁴ the message, to heal the sick and cast out demons (Mark 3:14f, Matt. 10:1). Companionship with Christ was the key to the growth of the early church: travelling the roads with him, observing him with others at weddings and in homes, watching miracles, listening to his questioning and teaching, witnessing his suffering and crucifixion, learning to pray, responding to the 'Great Commission'. His call to 'love one another as I have loved you', and to lay down their lives for others¹⁵, is followed by the remarkable claim: 'You are my friends (*philous*) if you do what I

⁹ SL McKenzie, *Dictionary of the OT Historical Books*, eds. Arnold, Williamson, IVP, Downers Grove, Illinois, 2005, 212.

¹⁰ Thus avoiding ancient pagan mythologies around the word 'king' (John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel – Your Kingdom Come*, ed. R Kent Hughes, Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, 2015, 147).

¹¹ ie. 'some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some shepherds and teachers', the latter pair suggesting two functions in the one person. The Message version reflects this well: 'pastor-teacher'. Significantly, Paul referred to himself as a 'herald (*kerux*) and an apostle and a teacher' (2 Tim. 1:11). Note his reflection on his own pastoral relationship with and influence on Timothy: 'You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me' (2 Tim. 3:10f).

¹² E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1971, 77, footnote 72.

¹³ David Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2012, 133.

¹⁴ The word 'preach' carries the limiting connotation of 'sermonising' (e.g. NASB, ESV, NIV, but cf. NRSV 'proclaim'), where the Greek means 'announce', 'declare', 'publish'. Even Paul saw himself as a 'herald (*kerux*), apostle and teacher.'

¹⁵ e.g. the self-emptying mindset and servanthood of Christ in Phil.2:1-11.

command you. No longer do I call you servants (*doulous*), for the servant doesn't know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you' (John 15: 14f).

I've found over the years that prayerful and intentional friendship, listening, teaching¹⁶ and transparency are key to effective long-term pastoral care.

Conclusion.

Among other influences, several scriptures and personal experiences have shaped my own pastoral theology and practice. To reiterate, parents ideally, or faithful servants outside the family have the primary formative role in guarding and nurturing Christian belief and character within a family (e.g. Lois and Eunice, 2 Tim. 1:5, 3:14f)¹⁷.

Until churches allocate more thought, effort and finance into educational support of parents, then current pastoral, preaching and pedagogical strategies may miss the mark. Parents need help in guiding their kids to train their faculties by practice to 'distinguish the good from the evil' forces, in their studies and the embedded individualism and idolatry of our culture and social media (Heb.5:14). At a congregational level, worship and sacrament, instruction and pastoral care all need to bridge the gap between scripture and culture, disturbing members¹⁸ out of their comfort zones, and forming mature members committed to i. gospel proclamation, ii. prayerful servant leadership and iii. confrontation of the powers of darkness. The call of Jesus (Mark 3:14, 15; Matt.10:1) hasn't been withdrawn. Pastoral practice that honours God via proclamation, instruction, modelling, admonishing and mentoring, will therefore demonstrate a balance between guarding the truth and promoting 'maturity in Christ' (Col.1:28)¹⁹.

¹⁶ Note Paul's advice to his 'mentoree' Timothy: 'Take the things you heard me say in front of many other witnesses and pass them on to trustworthy people who are also capable of teaching others' (2 Tim. 1:2, modelling).

¹⁷ Jesuits say, 'Give us a child till he's 7 and we'll have him for life'.

¹⁸ Bill Walker: 'True, but many are wounded, & casualties. Some need disturbing, but others are already disturbed enough to be right on the edge (like many among us who are struggling and desperate to hear those words of hope which speak as a balm into their brokenness)'.

¹⁹ Or again, 1 Tim. 1:5 - 'love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith'.