



Pastoral Reflection

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Pastoral Reflections Editor

In Praise of Pastors

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Jeremy Weetman has been in pastoral ministry for over twenty years. He and his wife planted the church they lead on the Gold Coast, Eikon Community, in 2006 and transitioned the congregation into a missional expression of church over the past two years. He has served on various denominational committees and is a sessional lecturer for Harvest Bible College, where he is also studying towards a Doctor of Ministry.

To an eleven year old Pastor Griffiths was a big man, with the commanding presence you would expect from an ex-sergeant major in the British army. He had answered the door when I arrived to collect the prize my RE teacher (his wife) had promised when I learned the 23rd Psalm off by heart. Somehow I think I managed to explain this to him, but you'll understand my response when he looked meaningfully at me and said, "I expect to see you in Sunday school this week young man." So my story, from RE class to Sunday school to meeting Jesus was largely framed by being confronted with the imposing presence of Pastor Griffiths.

He was always 'Pastor Griffiths,' never 'Pastor Joe,' although he became that to later congregations. To me he was always addressed by his surname, it was just 'right.'

He was my first pastor, and the man who taught me that to be a pastor was a calling, a vocation, a laying down of one's life for the sheep. Pastor Griffiths never had a church that numbered in the thousands, I don't even think in the hundreds, and yet over the years over a dozen full-time ministers came from churches he pastored.

As a boy I was a little scared of Pastor Griffiths, I think it was that commanding presence, but he was one of the most genuinely caring people I have known. My mum didn't drive, so he and his wife would call in to take her shopping each week and assist whenever and wherever they could. He was full of compassion and his eyes could carry a softness and warmth that would make anyone feel welcome and important.

To be a pastor is to be entrusted by Jesus with the care of his sheep, his people, his local gathering of disciples. We talk, preach, teach and research a lot about leadership, and thank God for it, but the New Testament only mentions *leader* to identify the leader of a synagogue in the gospel narratives, and the call or gift to lead is only noted in Romans 12 along with generosity, serving and encouragement. I'm not trying to diminish the need for solid leadership - goodness knows I need to strengthen that area of my calling - but I am suggesting we are missing the more necessary call to pastor.

The need for *pastors* is reflected in Eugene Peterson's memoir where he calls for a re-evaluation of the pastoral vocation as it is commonly practiced today as he seeks to answer the question, "What does it mean to be a pastor?" This can be a difficult question to find an answer to in a society where pastors are leaders, and managers, and often entrepreneurs, and even sometimes *drovers*, but in its simplest form a pastor is a shepherd.

The word *pastor* is only mentioned once in the New Testament, in Ephesians 4:11, however the concept of being a *shepherd* (or of caring for the sheep/people of God) is a major New Testament theme. Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd in John 10; in Hebrews he is called the Great Shepherd; 1 Peter 2 refers to Jesus as the 'Shepherd and Overseer of our souls', in chapter 5 as the Chief Shepherd; and in Revelation 7 the Lamb (Jesus) is the one who will shepherd the martyred believers. Certainly a shepherd must lead, but a shepherd is one who leads by virtue of close relationship with the sheep (implied in Jn. 10:4-5 since the sheep know his voice) and 'lays down his life' for the sheep.

The apostle Paul chose an interesting word to describe how he understood what he and his fellow ministers did, one that implies the 'laying down' of one's life, the word *diakonos*. It primarily referred to servants who waited on tables, and in the Greco-Roman culture, "...was thought to be appropriate only for the low-born, women, or slaves" (Giles 1989, pp. 50-51), but in the upside-down world of the kingdom of God servanthood is to be embraced as done in the service of Christ, through the Spirit of Christ, for the body of Christ, by the people of Christ, servants of the servant-King.

In the most common instances where Paul refers to 'gifts' – including that of Pastor – in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 the gifts are for the service, for ministry, for the benefit of the body of believers. In fact the *ministry* gifts of Ephesians 4 are to equip the body for, "works of service (*diakonia*)". This view of Christian ministry might explain why Paul prefaces his teaching in Romans 12 with the need to renew the mind and not allow the prejudices and social expectations of culture to influence how Christian ministry, to which all believers are called, is practiced.

Such an understanding conforms to Paul's description of Jesus in Philippians 2 where the believers are urged to 'not look to your own interests but the interests of others,' so that they might have 'the same mind that was in Christ Jesus' who 'took the form of a slave...humbled himself...became obedient.' Although Paul uses the term 'slave' (*doulos*) to characterise the extreme descent of Christ, it was the attitude of humility, common to slaves and servants, that was being commended here. So immersed in this aspect of service, of his calling as a *diakonos*, was Paul that he can confidently demand of the Corinthians who are becoming prideful that, rather, they should imitate Paul's humility (1 Cor. 4:16) and later, in desiring the good of many rather than just themselves, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (11:1).

My memories of Pastor Griffiths are of a man who demonstrated this kind of ministry. He could preach, but he wasn't great; he could teach, but he wasn't great; he could lead worship, but he wasn't great; he had Godly wisdom, but wasn't a qualified counsellor. In my forty years as a Christian I have come across many people who were far more accomplished in these areas than Pastor Griffiths, but I have only met a few who have loved their congregation like he did. Although he worked full-time in secular employment he took seriously the mandate of Christ to care for the people with whom he had been entrusted.

Pastor Griffiths' evenings and weekends were taken up with meetings and Bible studies and prayer meetings and that most old-fashioned of pastoral duties – visitation. I sat in a class of experienced ministers recently as we discussed the nature of ministry, and the lecturer made reference to the classic book *The Reformed Pastor* by Richard Baxter. In it Baxter describes how he converted the town of Kidderminster by visiting the homes of the inhabitants and catechizing them. We discussed how times had changed and how pastors no longer visited people in their homes and, in our time and culture, how many people prefer it that way. And yet, I thought of the sick, the elderly, the struggling families that I continue to visit because that is what Pastor Griffiths modelled for me, and that is what helps my congregation to feel loved and cared for and connected. Pastor Griffiths taught me that a pastor walks with his followers and lovingly and carefully (and sometimes sternly) leads them by giving his life to them and the journey they travel together.

Not everyone can do that. I only have a small church, and if I had hundreds, or thousands, there is no way I could visit people. I understand that this is why we have pastoral care teams or small-group leaders, and yet I also have the words of more than one follower of Jesus echoing in my mind that it is easier to get an appointment with their local member of parliament than their senior pastor. Not everyone can visit, not everyone wants to be visited, but I wonder what message would be sent and received if every now and then the senior leader visited the shut-in, the sick or the lonely?

Pastors are gifts to the body of Christ, and irrespective of whether they have a title or official role they will care for the people around them. Often leaders, preachers and teachers are remembered because of their level of influence, their writing or the recording of their talks. Not so much pastors. To be a pastor is a humble vocation where prayer, encouragement, shared sorrow and joy, and a deep care for those God connects you with is remembered only by those who journey with you. Pastors aren't always up-front leaders, on a platform, or recognised as such. Often they are people in any congregation or group who give care and support to those around them. Without these people our churches, our communities, our social groups and our world would be a far more damaged, hurting and fragmented place.

Caring for our congregations as servant-shepherds reminds us of our humanity and helps to keep us humble. When we are involved with the very human weaknesses, failings and struggles of ordinary people in their ordinary lives we are often confronted with our own weaknesses, failings and struggles. Along with his description of his vocation as that of a servant, Paul's favoured descriptor in addressing his letters is that of apostle (note that it is always, "Paul, an apostle," or similar, rather than Apostle Paul), which is often regarded by him as a ministry of weakness rather than one of status and grace (Clarke 2000, loc. 2107).

You would think that a seventeen year old would understand that his pastor was wiser than him, but I didn't. We had a situation in our church that ultimately decimated the congregation. I'm not sure what Pastor Griffiths could have done differently, and feel that through all the pain God was working his purposes for his church, but at the time I felt that it had all been handled wrongly and in the ignorance and arrogance of youth told my pastor so!

He was gracious, and though I could see the anger and hurt in his eyes, he said he understood my perspective even though he didn't agree, and urged me to pray for the church and the situation. So I did, and in that way that God has of revealing our own hearts, the Holy Spirit showed me that my reaction was born of my anger and my hurt and that rather than blaming my pastor I should pray for and with him.

I knew what I had to do, so with reluctance and embarrassment I went to his house and asked him to forgive me both my words and my attitude. He looked at me with gentle eyes, assured me that of course I was forgiven, and asked if I would pray with him. For the rest of the time I knew him, whether as my pastor or when we spasmodically met over the next few decades, he was never less than loving, gracious, encouraging and, at times, gently correcting.

My apology was accepted; our relationship remained strong.

I'm not suggesting that every situation should be handled in exactly the same manner, my point is that Pastor Griffiths *knew me* and responded in a way that provided for the greatest growth in my life and the healthiest outcome for our relationship. Pastors don't manage their congregations, they exegete them.

When describing himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus says that he knows his sheep and they know him, and then makes a stunning statement to describe the depth of that relationship, "Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (Jn. 10:15). The intimacy of the Trinitarian fellowship is the relationship Jesus has with his sheep. Obviously a pastor doesn't have that depth of relationship with his congregation, or even some of them, but the example set by the Shepherd is that those who are called as his under-shepherds will know the people with whom they are entrusted and will thus ensure the greatest care and journey of discipleship for them.

The leaders of local churches in the first century were charged by Paul to 'manage' (*proistemi*) his family - lead, direct, protect, guard - and 'care for' (*epimeleomai*) the congregation (1 Tim.3:4-5) - implying forethought and provision¹ (Vine 1997, p. 161) - which I would suggest seems to indicate more watching over *God's* church. This is an important distinction when we consider that Paul also calls these leaders 'stewards' (*oikonomos*) in Titus 1:7. The term steward was used of free men or

¹ Vine's notes: "the direction of mind towards the object cared for," and gives the example of the word as used in the story of the Good Samaritan.

ex-slaves, or more often of slaves who performed this role for their master (Young 1994, p. 102-103). This fits well with Paul's concept of gifted service and vocational disposition, since this overseer/steward's duties included, "...administer God's household...oversee the behaviour of the members...ensure sound teaching is promulgated...proper order is maintained...and respectful, orderly interaction between members of the household community" (Young 1994, p. 103). Such a role required both the gifting to fulfil the duties and the character to serve with humility and set the moral tone both within the community and, in this honour/shame conscious society, in the wider community as well.

The challenge of knowing the congregation, of caring for God's church as competent stewards, isn't necessarily dependent on the size of the local church but on the application and attitude of the pastor. Different sizes, different structures, different models and different cultures simply require a variety of approaches to the same end – knowing the people. What inhibits this outcome is organisational distance or isolation on the part of the pastor. As much as the biblical ideal is of a faith community of engaged disciples, this is also true of its leadership.

Whether Ephesians 4 refers to specific individuals whose vocational gift to the body is being described, or the 'ministry gifts' are each representative of a group of people so gifted within each local church community, there is no doubt that they are, indeed, gifts. Gordon Fee observes that the various lists of gifts we find in the Pauline epistles aren't exhaustive, but are representative of the diversity of the operation of the Spirit in the life of the church (Fee 1994, p. 161). Giles adds the insightful thought that Paul's description of these varied gifts ultimately excludes any separation between natural and supernatural ministries in the church and sees these gifts as whatever the Spirit presses into service for the growth and health of the church (Giles 1989, p. 16).

Pastors are gifts given by Christ and empowered by the Spirit for the building up of the body of Christ. To be a pastor, particularly one who has embraced a vocation as such, is often a difficult endeavour. We live in an often messy, always complicated and busy world. We live in a culture that is arguably more connected and less connected at the same time. This is the world in which pastors are charged by Jesus to shepherd the sheep, care for them, watch over them, and equip them for growth and maturity.

I remember sitting in Bible College during my final year, as a graduate of the college came to teach our pastoral ministry class. He looked at all of us eager young world-changers and began with words I have never forgotten, "Being a pastor is the worst job in the whole world...except for all the others."

Often that is our experience. People are thoughtless, and fickle, and take offense, and gossip, and criticise, and take pastors for granted. They are also kind, and generous, and supportive, and encouraging, and forgiving, and love their pastors more than we deserve. Pastors are flawed, messy and yet hopeful people who are seeking to shepherd other flawed, messy and yet hopeful people.

Pastor Griffiths taught me that loving God means loving his people as well, even when it is difficult and inconvenient and costly. He taught me that people are valuable because they are loved and valued by God.

And isn't that the Christian message?

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