

My New Pastoral Work

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“Feed the flock of God which is among you....” I Peter 5:2a

As a young minister, one immediately feels the awesome responsibility to Jesus Christ in connection with one's care of the congregation. Christ commissioned Peter to “feed my sheep” and “feed my lambs” (John 21:15-17). This commission is given to every minister of the gospel. And as it is so evident from the Scriptures, “feed the sheep” involves more than the official preaching of the Word on Sunday. Pastoral work concerns the private application of the Word. It is the preaching of the Word to the individual sheep of Christ. In Acts 20 the Apostle Paul describes his ministry in Ephesus as “teaching publicly, and *from house to house*,” vs. 20. (emphasis mine, MDV). Thus, pastoral work concerns the official, spiritual, individual care of the members of the congregation.

That care of the individual members of the congregation involves a broad range of problems and situations. It is as complex as life itself. It involves comforting and encouraging the sick, the afflicted, the grieving. It involves instructing and guiding the troubled, the confused, the distressed. It involves exhorting and admonishing in love those who are walking in ways of sin.

Of course the pastoral labors of a minister depend much upon the size of the congregation in which he is called to labor, as well as the particular character of the congregation. Being the pastor at Southwest Protestant Reformed Church, a congregation of approximately 70 families. I have had a considerable amount of pastoral work in the short time. I've been in the ministry. Many times pastoral work is toilsome, discouraging, very difficult labor. Yet, my experience has been that pastoral work is very rewarding, and that I have received a great blessing in these labors.

I have been asked upon more than one occasion, in connection with particular situations, “Isn't it very difficult for you to know what to say?” And my first inclination might be to answer: “Yes, it is very difficult.” Looking only at myself that would be true. I would feel very inadequate at times. I might ask myself, “What can I, such a young, inexperienced pastor, say to God's people who are in very difficult circumstances that can comfort them, encourage them?”

But that is not, and may be never be the case in the life of a faithful pastor. Why? Because I come to God's people, not with my own thoughts, not with trite words of my own, but *only* and *always* with the Word of God! It is certainly true that my words, my advice, my counsel would be of very little help to God's people. But I do not, and I may not come with my word, with my advice and opinions. By God's grace I come to God's people in need saying: “Thus saith the Lord!”

I have sometimes thought that it would be good to have more study in the area of Pastoral Work in our seminary. But, of course, no matter how much time were spent considering different problems and situations that might come up, one could not begin to treat the vast multitude of such problems and situations. And really every situation is unique. It concerns specific persons and specific circumstances, and must, therefore, be considered individually also. The point is that there can be no hard and fast rules for specific types of cases – say this every sick person, say this to everyone walking in ways of sin, say this to every couple experiencing marital problems.

That's why in Seminary we concentrate upon the principles of pastoral labor. And a fundamental principle is: *Always Bring the Word!*

A Pastor who always, without fail, heeds that principle does not dread pastoral work, does not question it, does not neglect it. But rather, he considers pastoral work an important part of his calling as a minister of the gospel. And that principle never fails! From my brief experience in pastoral work, already I am assured of that. No matter what the problem is, no matter what the situation is, God's Word is the answer. Oh, there are problems I cannot treat. Sometimes God's people need hospitalization or medication, etc. for either physical or mental problems. Nevertheless, ultimately the care is the Word.

And it has been very striking for me to see how God's Word speaks to His people in every conceivable situation. That is particularly true of the Psalms. The Psalms speak to us in every conceivable situation of life in which we may find ourselves. Our lives and experiences are reflected in that of the Psalmist.

This fact has especially impressed upon me the necessity of the pastor's being familiar with the Scriptures. My qualification, my competence to do pastoral work is to be found in the fact that I'm a minister of the *Word*. And, therefore, pastoral work among the members of the congregation goes hand in hand with the official preaching and teaching of the Word of God.

Finally, all this implies that I, as a pastor, must depend upon Christ in all my pastoral work. I must labor as Christ's ambassador, as one authorized and qualified by Christ to labor as a shepherd to His sheep. I must labor as one responsible for those sheep before Christ's face. I, and every faithful pastor, must have a deep sense of dependence upon Christ. That means that I pray! My life, and the life of every faithful pastor, must be a life of prayer.

Prayer is, of course, necessary for all of God's people, but it is especially necessary for the pastor. That's evident from the Scriptures. The prophets and apostles were men of prayer. Even our Lord Jesus Christ on more than one occasion was constrained to withdraw from the people to be by Himself to pray.

As a young pastor, it is through prayer and the Word of God that I am able to perform pastoral work. At times, of myself, I would surely falter; I would not even dare to begin my labors. But I pray, pray concerning specific members of the congregation, specific needs, and specific situations. I pray concerning of my own needs and my own weaknesses. Strengthened by prayer and armed with the Word of God, I am able to proceed with my work. And through that way of prayer and of faithfully expounding and applying the Word, I have the confidence that God's people hear the voice of their Good Shepherd.

Do not fail to remember your pastor in your personal prayers. He needs your prayers. Ask your heavenly Father to strengthen and encourage him, to grant him all that he needs to be a faithful pastor, that your congregation might be blessed and the cause of God's kingdom might be furthered.

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