

"IDEALS OF PASTORAL MINISTRY"

(Acts 20:17-38)

(John Stott)

In developing the pastoral metaphor, it is noteworthy that Paul described his own teaching ministry (as their 'shepherd'), warned them of false teachers ('wolves') and affirmed the value of their church members (God's sheep).

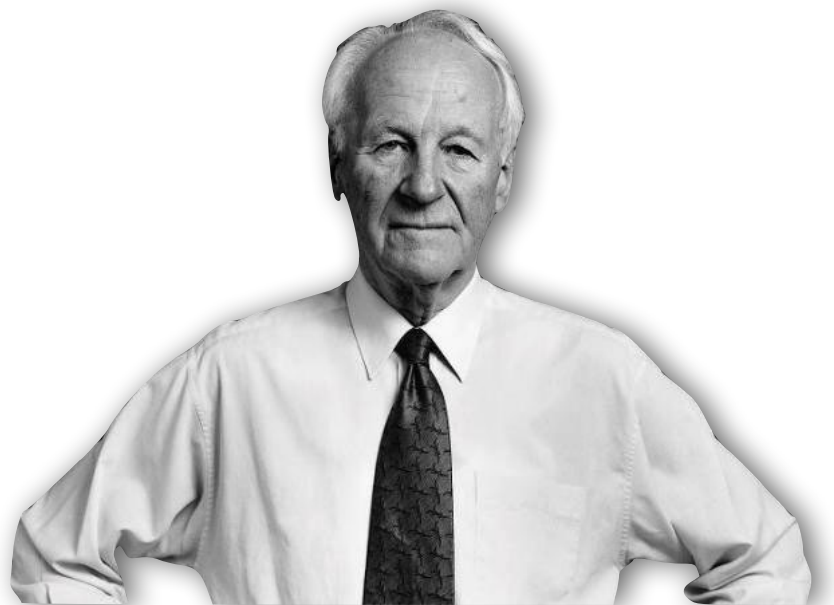
(i) The example of the apostle (the shepherd)

Several times he reminded the elders of his example. There had been a degree of thoroughness about it, which left his conscience clear. First, he had been thorough in his teaching. He had taught them about God's grace and kingdom (24-25) and the necessity of repentance and faith (21). He had not shrunk from declaring to them either what was profitable to them (20) or God's whole salvation plan (27). Secondly, he had been thorough in his coverage. He was as concerned to reach the whole population of Ephesus as he was to teach the whole purpose of God. He wanted to teach everything to everybody! So he had a ministry to both Jews and Gentiles, both residents and visitors. Thirdly, he was thorough in his methods. He taught both publicly (in synagogue and lecture hall) and privately (in homes), and he continued both day and night (20, 31). He was absolutely indefatigable. In modern terms, Paul's threefold thoroughness was a fine example of evangelism in depth'. He shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible ways. He taught the whole gospel to the whole city with his whole strength. His pastoral example must have been an unflinching inspiration to the Ephesian pastors.

(ii) The rise of false teachers (the wolves)

In the ancient Near East wolves were the chief enemy of sheep. Hunting now singly now in packs, they were a constant threat. Sheep were defenseless against them. Shepherds could not afford to relax their vigilance. Nor can Christian pastors. Jesus himself warned of false prophets; 'wolves in sheep's clothing' he called them (Matt. 7:14).

So the shepherds of Christ's flock have a double duty: to feed the sheep (by teaching the truth) and to protect them from wolves (by warning of error). As Paul put it to Titus, elders must hold firm the sure word according to apostolic teaching, so that they would be able both 'to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it (Titus 1:9). This emphasis is unpopular today. We are frequently told always to be positive in our teaching, and never negative. But those who say this have either not read the New Testament



or, having read it, they disagree with it. For the Lord Jesus and his apostles refuted error themselves and urged us to do the same. One wonders if it is the neglect of this obligation which is a major cause of today's theological confusion. If, when false teaching arises, Christian leaders sit idly by and do nothing, or turn tail and flee, they will earn the terrible epithet 'hirelings' who care nothing for Christ's flock (John 10:12ff). Then too it will be said of believers, as it was of Israel, that 'they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and . . . they became food for all the wild animals' (Ezek. 34:5).

(iii) *The value of the people (the sheep)*

Implicit in verse 28 is the truth that the pastoral oversight of the church belongs ultimately to God himself. Indeed, each of the three persons of the Trinity has a share in this oversight. To begin with, the church is 'God's church'. Next, whether we read that he redeemed it 'with his own blood' or 'with the blood of his own', it is plain that the purchase price was the blood of Christ. And over this church, which belongs to God and has been bought by Christ, the Holy Spirit appoints overseers. So the oversight is his too, or he could not delegate it to others. This splendid Trinitarian affirmation, that the pastoral oversight of the church belongs to God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), should have a profound effect on pastors. It should humble us to remember that the church is not ours, but God's. And it should inspire us to faithfulness. For sheep are not at all the clean and cuddly creatures they may appear. In fact, they are dirty, subject to unpleasant pests, and regularly need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice, ticks and worms. They are also unintelligent, wayward and obstinate. I hesitate to apply the metaphor too closely and characterize the people of God as dirty, lousy or stupid.' But some are a great trial to their pastors (and vice versa). And their pastors will persevere in caring for them only if they remember how valuable they are in God's sight. They are the flock of God the Father, purchased by the precious blood of God the Son, and supervised by overseers appointed by God the Holy Spirit. If the three persons of the Trinity are thus committed to the welfare of the people, should we not be also?

Richard Baxter's great book *The Reformed Pastor* (1656) is really an exposition of Acts 20:28, He wrote:

Oh then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: 'Did I die for them, and wilt not thou look after them? Were they worth my blood and are they not worth thy labour? Did I come down from heaven to earth, to seek and to save that which was lost; and wilt thou not go to the next door or street or village to seek them? How small is thy labour and condescension as to mine? I debased myself to this, but it is thy honour to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation; and was I willing to make thee a co-worker with me, and wilt thou refuse that little that lieth upon thy hands?'