



CHAPTER ONE

What Is a Pastor?

The Classical Model

Once you know who you are as a pastor, you'll be much more confident about what you're supposed to be doing as a pastor. And it seems to me that's the most frustrating thing about ministry in the twenty-first century. We've inherited multiple competing models of what a minister supposedly is, each with its corresponding job description. Many seem diametrically opposed. Is a pastor a chaplain or a missionary? Is he to focus on tending people who are already Christians, or on winning more people to a living faith in the Lord Jesus? Is the pastor a coach or care giver? Is he a manager or CEO of an organization or a preacher of God's word and steward of his sacred mysteries?

These various models aren't mutually exclusive. Winning souls and tending souls go together. Likewise management and leadership skills are helpful when it comes to the day-to-day life of the average Christian congregation in our world today. Yet that's just the point. Lots of things may be helpful, but which are necessary? Many things can be beneficial to the life and mission of the church, but which are essential? What should be the primary focus of our daily work as pastors? That's what I want to explore with you in this chapter. Let's take a look at the Scriptures and see what Jesus has to say about his church and her care. Let's discuss how Christ and the apostles understand the office of pastor and the nature of pastoral work. After that we'll consider how the church over the centuries has understood pastoral care.

CHRISTOCENTRIC PASTORAL CARE

“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified,” Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth (1 Cor 2:2). There’s a framework for pastoral work that translates well over the centuries; it’s both transcultural and timely in that it connects with people groups no matter where or when they live. In our pluralistic and syncretistic era, Paul’s words sound hopelessly stilted, narrow, opinionated, and—dare we say it?—downright intolerant. In an age when religious faith has been relegated to the narrow confines of personal experience and preference, language like this sounds off-putting. Nobody loves a hater. When inclusivity and tolerance are the norm and people are falling all over themselves to accommodate the diverse religious feelings of an increasingly eclectic and fragmented population, it’s tempting to write Paul off as some kind of religious fanatic or bigot.

Yet the facts of the case are entirely different. Highly educated in both theology and the secular arts and sciences, Paul was thoroughly familiar with all the religious options of his day. During his far-flung missionary journeys he moved easily and comfortably between the radically different subcultures of the sprawling Roman Empire. He related naturally both to the common person and to the elite. For his time and place, he was a thoroughly modern man; fully aware of the intellectual, emotional, and religious sensitivities of a wide swath of diverse ethnicities. He moved confidently through the intricate layers of the social structure of his day, interacting comfortably with common citizens (Acts 16), elite intelligentsia (Acts 17), Roman bureaucrats (Acts 25), and Jewish potentates (Acts 26). Paul was no narrow-minded bigot. Why, then, despite all the diversity he encountered would he insist that his entire ministry be focused exclusively and explicitly on Jesus Christ and, of all things, his cross?

GOD ENFLESHED:

MYSTERY HIDDEN AND REVEALED

The answer lies in the unique identity of Jesus. He’s not the Christian equivalent of Siddhartha Gautama, Confucius, Mohammed or, for that matter, Moses or Elijah. It’s clear from the original sources that Jesus didn’t see himself as one in a long line of religious teachers, but

consciously and deliberately identified himself with the unseen and almighty Creator of heaven and earth (e.g., Luke 1:32; John 8:51). He was not just another religious teacher or guru, but he did things only God can do: He created all things (John 1:3), forgave sins (Matt 9:6), and claimed the power of God for the final judgment (Mark 14:62). There's compelling evidence that he was ultimately tried, convicted, and executed not for some capital crime under Roman law, but because he had the audacity to claim he was God's own Son—unspeakable blasphemy in the eyes of his own contemporaries (John 19:7).

That's why Paul the apostle was so intent on the person and work of Jesus. Though he spent the early part of his career ferreting out the first Christian followers for being adherents of what he considered a Jewish heresy (Acts 9:2), Paul had a spectacular change of mind and heart. After his dramatic conversion (9:4–6), he first carefully researched the Scriptures, then finally consulted with men who had been personally taught by Jesus (Gal 1:17–18). From then on Paul was absolutely enthralled and captivated with what he called “God's mystery” (Col 2:2): that the man Jesus, besides being fully human, was at one and the same time God.

“Mystery” means something beyond the reach of human sensory perception and intellect. And that's certainly true when it comes to the true identity of Jesus. No one could tell that Jesus was God just by looking at him. It's just the same today; no one can conclude that Jesus is God using human sensory and reasoning capacity alone; it remains an article of faith. Yet this faith is not a stab in the dark. It's grounded in the tangible reality of Jesus' human flesh and blood: born of his virgin mother, crucified, dead, and buried, but then on the third day raised from the dead—forty days later to ascend into glory. It sounds like a fairy tale, but it's not.

The mystery of Christ isn't the product of an overly creative religious imagination. This mystery didn't happen in some never-never land, but within the time-space reference of the men and women most intimately connected with Jesus. To cite one example: John the apostle was with Jesus the night of his betrayal (John 13:23). He stood at the foot of the cross the day Jesus was executed (19:27). He observed firsthand the open tomb (20:8) and was there one week

later when Thomas pressed his incredulous fingers into the living flesh of Jesus (20:27).

Toward the end of his ministry, John testified that the message of the gospel was built around the tangible and audible evidence of his personal firsthand encounter with Jesus: “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). For John, the gospel was not merely a concept or abstract idea. He believed that the very life and ministry of Jesus and the forgiveness and life he came to bring was actively present and conveyed through his own apostolic ministry.

This is mystery in action: It is enacted and embodied in sensory form even among us still today. Jesus comes audibly and tangibly in human speech and actions, bridging time and space to connect with people in a completely different time and place. What remains hidden to human beings using only their senses and intellect is revealed and enacted in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Thus in apostolic preaching and sacramental administration history repeats itself; Jesus is again present with his gifts. “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 John 1:1). John contended that in his preaching and teaching he was passing along exactly what he had received and heard from Jesus. In the baptizing, teaching, and communion of John and his fellow apostles, those early Christians who had never met Jesus during his earthly ministry themselves received exactly what the apostles did, plus *fellowship*—a real and genuine connection and communion—with God the Father and his beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

How does all this talk about mystery inform pastoral work and ministry in our time, you ask? That’s simple—and yet quite profound. Mystery is by very nature both. Mystery remains forever inaccessible to human scrutiny. Yet mystery revealed provides access to the inaccessible. We all have little epiphanies (disclosures) of mystery in our ordinary human lives that give us a bit of insight here. For example, I love my wife more than life itself. Yet for all the 47 years our Lord

has given us together, I find there's always something more to learn about Jane; there's no way I can completely plumb the depths of the mystery of our love and life. That's the very nature of mystery. There's always more to learn.

So if you've been worried that you don't quite have it together in ministry or that others are savvier when it comes to theology, lighten up on yourself. If you don't have all the answers, join the crowd. The best pastors among us are the ones who realize how little they actually know and how much more they have to master concerning the art of the care of souls. Soul care, too, is a mystery. The more it dawns on you, the more there's left to grasp.

Christ Jesus is himself God's great mystery "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). In this man Jesus the disciples were in contact with the living God; he was their tangible link with eternity. Yet the more the disciples came to know Jesus, the more they realized there was yet to discover. His mystery revealed remains perpetually hidden. Yet in Jesus the almighty Maker of heaven and earth came down from heaven to give his life to the world, and the world has never been the same since.

THE HIDDEN WORK OF GOD

The very night of his "departure," as the gospel writers referred to his sacrificial suffering and death, one of the disciples of Jesus laid before him the nub of the issue: "Show us the Father," Phillip said, "and it is enough for us" (John 14:8). I think we can understand his frustration. Who hasn't ever yearned for incontrovertible proof of God's existence, some tangible evidence that he is actively working on our behalf? Jesus' answer has deep implications for how you and I still do ministry today: "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves" (John 14:9-11).

Here the mystery is unveiled. Jesus contends that in his words and works God the Father was actively speaking and doing. "My Father