



Reforming the Pastoral Care of the Church

Thomas N. Smith

It is a matter of regular surprise to me that people do not think of Paul as a pastor. An apostle, yes. A missionary, yes. A church-planter, yes. But not a pastor.

Now this may reveal a good many things, but one thing it surely discloses is the fact that we all tend to read the New Testament in a wooden and mechanical fashion. We assume much in our reading, and these assumptions often blind us to the spirit of what we read.

The spirit of all that Paul writes, and all that Luke records of his acts, is supremely *pastoral*. That is to say, it is concerned with the care of God's flock, the church. The "care of the churches" (cf. 2 Cor. 11:28) is the burden of burdens to the apostle to the Gentiles. And the essence of that burden, as Paul understood it, as he relieved himself of it, is contained in the words of 2 Corinthians 1:24:

*"Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy,
because it is by faith you stand firm."*

In these few choice words, we have everything that Paul regards as vital, as essential to what he calls "taking care of the church of God."

In these words, we are confronted, first of all, with the deterrent which Paul imposed upon himself in the care of the churches. "Not that we lord it over your faith..."

In speaking thus, Paul is in complete harmony with the rest of the New Testament. Lordship in the New Testament writings belongs to only One, the true and living God who has disclosed Himself in Jesus Christ. "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me," said Jesus in commissioning His apostles. It was this lesson of Lordship and servanthood that the original disciples had such difficulty in understanding and evidencing in their own interpretational relationships (cf. for example Matthew 20:20-28 and John 13:1-17). That this issue continued to be a burning one is apparent, for we see later New Testament documents addressing it as well. (3 John 9, 10) The source of the problem is not hard to discover. It is pride, the origin of original sin. It is such pride that would usurp the rights and prerogatives of God Himself.

Thus, Paul in the same Corinthian letter (cf. 2 Cor. 4:5) can describe his ministry in these terms:

*"For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves your
servants for Jesus' sake."*

On this point, that Jesus is Lord and that pastors are servants, Paul is unequivocal and emphatic. The stress that he places upon this truth is a safeguard in terms of at least two central issues in the community of the redeemed.

First, Paul is jealously guarding *the foundational truth* of Christian doctrine and practice: The Supremacy of God! "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3) "There is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came, and through whom we live." (1 Cor. 8:6) The supremacy of God means that all authority is His, that only He possesses absolute authority, and that any authority invested in men is derived from Him and thus accountable to Him.

This has tremendous practical significance for those entrusted with the care of Christians in Christian churches. Pastors are invested with authority from Christ for their work. That work is seen in pastoral labors invested in the conversion and nurture of Christ's sheep. Therefore, this derived and accountable authority is only properly exercised when ministers reflect in all their attitudes and actions toward the flock both the love and care of Christ, the Great Shepherd and Lord of the Church. The framers of the Reformation confessions recognized this and in their reaction against the clerical authoritarianism of Rome wrote such things as:

"God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to His word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship."

(The Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 20, Sec.II)

The heart-felt conviction that Jesus is Lord, solely and supremely Lord of the Church, must constrain the genuinely New Testament pastor to avoid anything that even remotely resembles "lording it over the faith" of Christians.

But there is another parallel truth that Paul seeks to guard in his abhorance of "lording." It is the truth of the liberty of the Christian man. If Christ is Lord, and the believer is subject only to Christ, then it follows that any authoritarian coercion is diametrically opposed to that Lordship and to Christian liberty.

It is only New Testament Christianity, authentic Christianity, that truly guards the inviolability of the human soul. The Gospel of Christ converts men, not by violating them, but by renewing and persuading them through the power of the Word and the Spirit. And this work of conversion, begun in the Spirit's regenerating ministry, is carried on in sanctification through the same means: renewal and persuasion in the power of the Word and Spirit.

The ministry of the New Covenant reflects this order of things most plainly. It is persuasive, never coercive. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual. The tools of our pastoral work are not authoritarian, but evangelical. It is the Truth that moves, that changes, that persuades men.

The man who knows this, and I mean truly knows this, will abhor and eschew every ploy, every human "gimmick" or "trick," and every clever strategy that seeks to manipulate and manage Christian men and women. He will be on constant guard against the inherent tendency in all of us to move men to change by means other than the Truth delivered to men in the power of the Word and the Spirit of Christ. He will cultivate in himself every evangelical and spiritual means to teach, to exhort, to warn, to admonish, and to train by that truth. In doing these things, he will guard these central and supreme truths of Christ's Lordship and personal Christian liberty.

Practically, this will mean at least three things:

First, pastors must humbly, lovingly, and humanly instruct, warn and encourage those under their ministerial care. This must be the *modus operandi* of their private and public ministry.

Secondly, pastors must deal with people in their congregation with all the care and respect, all the creativity and variety, which each person and his particular need demands of them. They must care enough to get involved with persons, not just in thought or theory. They must "get their hands dirty" with actual problems and spend themselves for their flock.

Thirdly, pastors must never threaten, cow, manipulate, or otherwise "use" men. Consider Paul and Apollos; in 1 Corinthians 16:12:

"Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity."

Here is the apostle acting as the pastor. He has a wish: namely, that Apollos might go to Corinth. It is a well-meant wish. Surely Apollos would be good for the Corinthians. But, Apollos is otherwise minded. He has no desire to go. Indeed, he is "quite unwilling" to do so. But Paul, apostle though he is, does not resort to commandeering, nor to wheedling or pouting. He accepts Apollos' decision with rare grace, explains the situation to the Corinthians, and expresses hope and confidence that Apollos will change his mind at a later time. This is the attitude of a true pastor, of a ministerial leader who really believes in the Lordship of Christ and the liberty of the Christian. This must characterize us if we would be worthy of the title "ministers of Christ."

It is when this deterrent is lost sight of that evil of every kind ensues in the churches. This is the power of cult leaders: they "lead" by coercion and by demand, not by the persuasion of the truth. And when we, evangelical though we may be in name, begin to act from the same principles and motives, we have ceased to be evangelical in truth.

Furthermore, when we "lord it over" men's faith and practice, we lose our right to demand men's attention, let alone their obedience, a la Hebrews 13:17. At the same point that we begin to demand the obedience of Christ's people on the basis of anything other than the Truth of His Word, they must obey God rather than man." At that point, and just at that point, we have lost the right to lead and they have received the obligation to disobey.

All of this is simply the believer taking very seriously the word of the Lord Jesus who said:

"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers." (Matthew 23:8)

But, if New Testament ministers are not "lords" over the church then what precisely is their role among the people of God? The Apostle does not leave us in doubt. "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith that you stand firm." Here, we are given a beautiful and succinct description of the role and task of pastoral ministry: "...we work with you for your joy."

In describing himself in his role within the Church of Christ, Paul employs a rich and varied vocabulary. In introducing himself to the churches, he usually calls himself "an apostle," (although not always, cf., for example, Philippians 1:1). He may speak of himself as "a preacher and a teacher" (cf., for example, 2 Timothy 1:11). However, the overwhelming preponderance of vocabulary used by Paul to expose his own understanding of himself is

service oriented. Thus, he delights to call himself a "servant" or a bond-slave of Jesus Christ; cf., for example, Romans 1:1. Moreover, he favors the word "minister," (The Greek is "*diaconos*," from which we get the word "deacon") and uses it frequently; cf. examples in 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; Col. 1:23, 25; et al.

Now the term Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 1:24, translated in the NIV as "We work with you," is the simple word "helper," ("*sunergos*"). Paul uses this word often to describe himself and others who worked with him in the Gentile churches. The form which he chooses to employ here indicates that he sees himself as one who "works with them." He aids them; he cooperates with them; he strives with them in the work of the gospel. There is no hint of a superior attitude, no solitary importance which he considers belonging uniquely to himself.

What Christ-like humility is displayed in Paul's use of this descriptive term for himself! The Pauline pattern is nothing but the pattern imposed by the example of the Lord Jesus upon the disciples in the Upper Room, in John 13, and imposed by Paul himself from the same example in Philippians 2:1-11. Pastors are servants, ministers, helpers. The vocabulary of the New Testament is instructive here. There is little said, by comparison, about leadership, probably because this concept was too easily distorted by worldly ideas current in the Roman world.

Furthermore, there is nothing said about "office" in the strict sense of the word; "office" in the New Testament is a spiritual function carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit for the common good of the church. Much more is made of these "service" oriented words throughout the New Testament. And Paul's use of "*sunergos*" in 2 Corinthians 1:24 reflects the ethos of the New Testament from the Chief Shepherd to all the various undershepherds and helpers, including Phoebe and Priscilla, as well as Timothy and Titus. If this attitude of service orientation were the prime mover in all our attitudes, then books and articles about pastoral abuse would be superfluous. But, because "old Adam is stronger than young Philip" (Martin Luther's comment regarding Philip Melancthon, his younger companion in the Reformation), we need regularly to be reminded of the true role of ministry in the church. We who are called as pastors are servants, ministers, helpers. Nothing more, because we need nothing more: "The servant is not above his Master." And nothing less, because the Lord Jesus delights in those who prove themselves faithful to Him in such roles: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Moreover, the use of this terminology by Paul indicates his concept of leadership in the churches. Paul sees himself, not as "over" them in the sense of being "on top" of them, but as one who assists them in the Christian life and ministry. The whole New Testament insistence on "mutual participation," (i.e., the "one anothers") is seen here! We are in Christ together. We share in one Spirit together. We are in one body together. We have one goal and purpose together. This is the outworking of principles that Paul regards as central and essential to his whole view of God's eternal purpose in the church; cf. Ephesians 4:1-16. And, practically, this is but the outworking of the one law of the church, the law of love, the law of Christ; cf. Galatians 6:1, 2.

If this view of the pastoral ministry is thriving in the churches, then peace and blessing will result. But if it is neglected or denied, then the conditions warned against in Galatians 5:15 will surely predominate.

Notice, further, that Paul describes himself as "working with them for their joy." How unexpectedly Pauline! Paul can here sum up his whole purpose in ministry, his consummate goal in dealing with the Corinthians (a difficult church if there ever was one) in this word: "I want, more than anything else, to promote your joy in the Lord." For many pastors and

preachers this is a concept that is so foreign, so alien, so strange, that it never seems to enter their heads! They want to help their people in obedience, in holiness, in witnessing, in Christian living in the home, in giving, etc. But to sum up one's whole philosophy of ministry as being "helpers of their joy"—it just doesn't figure!

How foreign, how alien, how strange is this thinking, however, in the light of the Biblical testimony! In the Old Testament it is the joy of the Lord that is the strength of God's people—strength for obedience to His law. It is the delight that the saint takes in God Himself that translates into joyful compliance with God's commandments, cf. Ezra 8, Psalm 19 and Psalm 119. And in the New Testament joy is not simply one of those luxuries that we can live better with, but, finally, can live without. No! Joy is at the very heart of Christian conversion and living. Those brought to faith are brought to joy, cf. Acts 8:39 and 16:34.

The fruit of the Spirit, that is, the result of the presence of God's Spirit in the life of the Christian and the Christian church is "joy." (cf. Galatians 5:22) The whole kingdom of God and the life that the believer lives in that kingdom may be summed up as "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (cf. Romans 14:17) And all this can be traced back to the gracious bequest of the dying Savior to His disciples in the act of washing their feet. As He taught them, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (John 13:17)

The truth is that there is no Christian living, no Christian obedience, without joy in the Lord Himself. There is nothing that pleases the Lord unless it springs from the joy which His people take in Him. Even obedience to His commandments, when done for other reasons than out of the personal delight we have in the Lord Himself falls short of that obedience which pleases Him.

If these things are true, it becomes plain as day why promoting the joy of the Corinthians (and other churches) was so central to Paul's pattern of pastoral ministry. Moreover, in pointing out the destructive and anti-Christian tendencies of the heresies imbibed by the Galatian churches, Paul sees as the "give away" the fact that as the Judaizers with their legal emphases have come in, the Christian joy of the Galatians has gone out:

"What has happened to your joy?" (Galatians 4:15)

And the same thing may be ascertained by a careful examination of the relationship of the problems at Philippi and Paul's repeated insistence upon the grace of joy.

This is the pattern of all authentic New Testament ministry: its goal is to establish, promote, and secure the joy of the saints in their God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, by what means, we ask, may we most efficiently achieve and maintain this?

First, we must be thoroughly convinced that this is our task. Unless we believe this, there is little hope that we shall make it a priority. The man who believes the duty of the pastor in preaching is to bludgeon his people will find himself repelled by my emphasis upon this. But the man who understands the dynamics of Christian faith and life will realize that what God wants from His people is, first and last, *their hearts*. He is interested in them and wants them to be interested in Him for Himself. Joy is inextricably bound up, therefore, with faith in Christ and love to Christ; cf. Romans 15:13, 1 Peter 1:8, 9. And the three are inescapably bound up together in what constitutes obedience that is pleasing to God. Therefore, ministers must come to see themselves as those who "work with them for their joy."

Moreover, we who serve Christ's church must labor to destroy and undermine all that obstructs the joy of God's people. J.1. Packer has rightly called the theologian "the sewage expert of the Church." The pastor-theologian (and that is what the minister is to be), must be an expert at recognizing and understanding blockages, spiritual blockages. Furthermore, he must be an expert at carefully and wisely clearing such blockages away. In doing so, he will be constantly learning, understanding, perceiving, and destroying those things which block the heart from the joy of the Lord. In private and in public ministry among his people he will seek to "preach the word, in season and out of season; reproof, rebuking, and encouraging with all sound teaching and great patience."

He must make himself a student of the human heart, that is, of human behavior and motivation. To change the metaphor, the pastor must become a spiritual heart specialist, gifted at removing calcifications from the major arteries and capable of performing by-pass surgery to guarantee that ample supplies of joy will continue to flow to believing hearts.

The primary tool for carrying on this work is preaching. We must preach, truly preach, to men. We must confront them with the truth in love. We must reason with them in the monologue of preaching as well as in the dialogue of pastoral counselling. We must make the truth of God into forms that will allow them to experience proper digestion of this food. Thus, the primary means of promoting and securing the joy of the saints is true preaching. I would define such preaching as the setting forth of the truth of the bible, in private and in public, with a biblical proportion or emphasis, in a biblical style or manner, in its biblical relationship to Christ Himself in the Gospel.

This, and only this, can really ensure the joy of God's people. This will establish and increase their faith, love, and, therefore, their joy! Let us consider the definition of preaching which I have given in some detail.

First, preaching is the setting forth of biblical truth. We preach the Word; cf. 2 Tim. 4:2. We preach Christ; Col. 1:28. We preach the Word of Christ; Rom. 10:17 and Col. 3:16. As such we are communicating the message of the Old and New Testaments, the Bible, as a *distinctively* Christian Book. We believe that these God-breathed Scriptures are able to equip the man of God for the joy-prompting work of preaching. Our work is to communicate the Word of God to the people of God. This is what their hearts thirst for and long for. This will feed them, rest them, rejoice them; cf. Psalm 19.

And this work of preaching is, broadly speaking, a work carried on in private and in public. We have Paul's own pattern here as well; cf. Acts 20:20, 21. Viewed in this way, the whole of our work then is really the work of preaching. Not, for sure, in any ridiculous and artificial way, as if we go about everywhere declaiming and proclaiming. But, in the sense that we are concerned with bringing the truth of the Word of God to bear practically and therapeutically on the hearts and lives of the people of God for whom we are responsible. Thus, "in season and out of season," in every situation and circumstance, we are "buying up the opportunities" placed before us by the Divine providence to do men good by explaining and applying God's truth to their lives. And our goal is the same: We seek to promote holiness through Christian joy and joy through Christian holiness.

Furthermore, we will promote the joy of our people if our communication of the truth is made with a biblical proportion and emphasis. All biblical truth is God's truth, but not all biblical truth is given the same emphasis by the writers of Holy Scripture. When undue, disproportionate emphasis is given to any facet of truth, distortion results, and the joy of God's people is thereby threatened. I still remember saying to a friend who told me he was

about to begin a systematic exposition of 1 Corinthians in his church, "I hope you both survive!" He was nonplussed and upon inquiring as to what I meant by such a statement, I replied, "Remember that 1 Corinthians was written to a pathological church. With a wise and cautious handling, it can make a sick church well. But, without such wisdom and caution, it can make a well church sick." It is a question of proportion and emphasis. Without this biblical, i.e., wise and cautious, handling of the truth, all truth becomes less than the whole truth and thus detrimental to the health and well-being of Christians. Faith, love, hope, and joy become the victims, and sickness, if not outright plague, ensues. We all know horror stories of situations victimized by a disproportionate and imbalanced preaching of biblical truths, of grace being turned into licentiousness and obedience being transformed into legalism. To ensure the joy of our people, we as pastor-preachers must take pains to preach the truth with balance and biblical proportion.

And there is something else, closely akin to this last thing: We must preach God's truth in a biblical manner. "The servant of the Lord must not be quarrelsome, but kind." (Cf. 2 Tim. 2:24ff.) "The wrath of man works not the righteousness of God." (Cf. James 1:20) As ministers of the Gospel of peace, we must be men of peace, i.e., lovers of peace ourselves and seeking peace with all men. The angry man is disqualified from this work, for he stands condemned by the Apostolic injunction to be "not violent, but gentle." (Cf. 1 Tim. 3:3) To really promote the joy of God's saints, we must be men who themselves are acquainted, deeply acquainted, with this joy. And such acquaintance is exclusive of anger, rage, bitterness, and malice. Preaching that reveals such ugly things is not Christian preaching, whatever its content. And such preaching will not promote and ensure true joy. On the contrary, it will damage and destroy it. Thus the angry man who justifies angry preaching with defenses of zeal and "righteous indignation" is fooling no one but himself. Let us learn from Charles Simeon and John Newton, two 18th century men, alike in many ways, and alike in this: they both deplored and condemned "angry preaching" as destructive of the work of God in the lives of His people. Moreover, both Newton and Simeon (in one church for nearly sixty years!) preached in a manner that reflected the holiness and example of Jesus among His disciples. Nor is this to say that we are not to be plainspoken in the face of sin and disobedience. We must "rebuke and reprove" as well as "exhort." But, we must be dead sure that when the harsher requirements of our calling are called for, they are carried out in response to principle rather than frustrated rage and personal pique. Joyless, angry preaching, far from promoting joy, will destroy it.

Finally, and most importantly, we must preach all truth in its relationship to Christ in the Gospel if we would maintain the joy of Christians. We have already seen that we preach the Word, cf. 2 Tim. 4:2. And we preach Christ, cf. Col. 1:28. And the Word of Christ, cf. Rom. 10:17 and Col. 3:16. (This is to say that all preaching that is Christian is focused on Jesus Christ in the Gospel.) All truth that is biblical is, for the Christian and the Christian preacher, **evangelical** truth. It is my opinion, after nearly twenty-five years of preaching and hearing preaching, that this factor is not so obvious as it may appear to be. Indeed, I would go further: It is my belief that the current problem of authoritarianism is not simply a problem, it is, at its root, **a denial of the whole Christian position**. It is a failure to grasp the essence of the truth as it is in Jesus. It is blindness which cannot see to grasp the fundamental truth of the incarnation and death of Jesus. This is our Lord's point in John 13 and Paul's in Philippians 2:1-11.

The self-emptying and crucifixion of the God-Man tell us what God has done to Himself in order to secure our willing and glad response to Him, cf. Rom. 14:7-12. How can arrogance and "lording" exist for one moment before the realities of the self-abnegation and voluntary sufferings of the Son of God? And how can men, mere men, who have understood, really

understood these things, presume to take on "airs and graces?" Such an attitude is obscene!

So, to understand the gospel of the humiliation of the Lord of Glory is to see that the whole counsel of God is permeated with the gospel of humiliation. And such an understanding will inform all our handling of all biblical truth.

The effect of this will be that we will, as ministers of the gospel, relate all the truth of our preaching to the person, work and example of the Lord Jesus Christ. And this is exactly what Paul does, and does with an expertise par excellence! Does he call for a forgiving, forbearing spirit among Christians? Then he does so from the truth of the gospel, cf. Eph. 4:32. Does he call us to walk in love? Then he calls us to consider the sacrifice of Christ to God, cf. Eph. 5:1. Does he require husbands to love their wives? Then he makes this requirement hinge on Christ's love and sacrificial death for the church, cf. Eph. 5:25ff. Does Paul exhort us to humility and self-sacrifice? The exhortation is rooted in one of the grandest declarations of Christ's humiliation to be found anywhere, cf. Phil. 2:1-8. And on and on...

In fact, every call to Christian living found in the writings of Paul is rooted and grounded in the facts of redemptive accomplishment already expounded by him, cf. Ephesians 4:1-6:20 in relation to the first three chapters of the same letter. Consider as well Romans 12:1-15:13 in its relationship to the first eleven chapters of Paul's epistle. All of this has been succinctly expressed in the statement: **The ethical imperatives of the New Testament are rooted in its redemptive indicatives!** Which is to say: Christian living is required by the constraining power of the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is this, the gospel, that secures and maintains Christian joy, and it is Christian joy that secures and maintains the obedience that is really Christian. (Cf., for example, John Piper's book, *Desiring God: Confessions of a Christian Hedonist*, Multnomah, 1987.) Preaching that would encourage joy must be preaching that understands this!

But there is more. Christian preaching has two focal points: The one, the crucifixion of the Son of God, the other, the final redemption of His second coming and eternal kingdom. Our preaching must be replete with Christian hope. The Christian is a person living in two ages at one and the same time. He has been introduced to the New Creation, cf. 2 Cor. 5:17. But, he is still "absent from the Lord," and, as such, must endure "the sufferings of this present time," cf. Rom. 8:18. In this state, which is a continual state of tension and stress, he "groans," cf. Rom. 8:22, 23 with 7:24. His joy, therefore, is of necessity, always threatened!

But, the reality of the hope of Christ's return and the everlasting kingdom that return will bring with Him buoys up and fortifies the Christian's joy. He therefore "rejoices in hope of the glory of God," cf. Rom. 5:2; and "consider(s) that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us," cf. Rom. 8:18. (Cf. also 2 Cor. 4:16-18; 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; et al.)

The Christian preacher will appreciate these truths deeply. And this appreciation will drive him to preach in a manner that constantly keeps the hope of Christ's coming before the hearts of His people. Such preaching will encourage them, hearten them, and fill them with "joy unspeakable and full of glory," cf. 1 Peter 1:8.

Therefore, in this manner, we who are given the task of "helping them with their joy" will accomplish this work. The result will be wonderful. Christians will be encouraged in the best

possible way to live lives that honor and please (read, "give pleasure to") the Lord who bought them. Peace will characterize our churches. And pastors, some of the most harried and stressed-out professionals in our modern world, can begin to take joy in their ministries. But, where joy is absent, these and other good things like them, will, likewise, be absent. Holiness will turn into the sludge of legal obedience. Trouble and discord will wreck assemblies. And pastors will be marked by pain, bitterness and cynicism.

This is the Pauline pattern for reforming our ministries. It is the pattern modeled by our Lord Jesus Christ and seen throughout the New Testament. It is distinctively Christian in root and branch. It is the true antidote to ministries which claim to be Christian, but which are, in reality, just another expression of the worldliness that motivates the "ruler of the Gentiles," cf. Matthew 20:25. If those of us who have come to understand and love God's sovereignty in grace could come to understand and love this view of ministry, a new day of grace and peace could well invade our churches and a new work of reformation would result. May the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Helper of our joy, hasten such a day!

About the Author

Thomas N. Smith is Pastor of the Randolph Street Baptist Church, Charleston, West Virginia and associate editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal*.