

Five Essential Aspects of Pastoral Ministry

Pastor Tom Hicks



Whole books have been written on pastoral ministry; so, even an attempt at summarizing it in a short blog post will fall short of the mark. But I would suggest that several principles rise to a high level of importance when considering the subject of pastoral ministry. Much of what passes for pastoral ministry today is nothing other than the philosophies and methods of corporate America pressed down upon the church. Too many pastors think of themselves as “doing their jobs,” and they don’t think of themselves as God’s men who are called to a whole-life pastoral ministry among God’s beloved people. Consider the following five aspects of biblical pastoral ministry.

1. A Pastor Watches Himself

True pastoring always begins with personal holiness. In 1 Timothy 4:16, Paul tells Timothy “Keep a close watch on yourself.” The word “watch” means “to be vigilant” or “to pay close attention.” A pastor needs to give careful attention to his own soul because he is called to be a holy man. He’s a student of the streams of sin as they run inside of his own heart. And he learns to apply the gospel of grace for the mortification of his sin. He must be a man who knows the great love of Christ for him, whose heart is conquered by a crucified and risen Savior, and whose hope is everlasting life in Him. Because of Christ’s love, a pastor is faithfully committed to prayerful personal communion with Him, and he prays for his family, the church, his community, and the world. He learns to repent quickly of sin, and he’s deeply devoted to studying Scripture and to keeping God’s good commandments as an expression of his love for Christ.

A pastor also watches himself by being a faithful husband to his wife and father to his children, loving them and serving them just as Christ has served him. He loves and teaches his wife and children the Word of God. And he’s involved in his family life, sharing life with his wife, enjoying his children and taking sincere interest in them. Faithful pastors watch themselves.

Only when a pastor faithfully watches himself is he able to watch others faithfully.

2. A Pastor Watches His Teaching

In 1 Timothy 4:16, Paul tells Timothy, “keep a close watch ... on the teaching.” There is a heresy made for every one of us. Heresy is a form of false teaching that undermines the gospel. Sadly, there is a heresy made for every pastor. Heresies tell us that we can have our idols, and we can have Jesus too. Some heresies puff us up in self-righteous religious pride, while other heresies promote sensual worldliness. Pastors can be tempted to adopt forms of false teaching that serve themselves rather than Christ and His people. Even when a pastor begins with good doctrine, he can drift into error over time, if he is not very careful to watch his teaching.

A pastor must be very careful to teach what the Bible says is true, not what he wants the Bible to say is true. He is responsible to repeat what God says in His Word. A pastor simply delivers what he has received, adding nothing, subtracting nothing. That means a pastor studies the Bible carefully and holds fast the word of life for his own soul and for the souls of others by faith. God’s beloved people

are only fed when pastors proclaim sound doctrine clearly and consistently, even though it will cost them their idols, and it may cost them their very lives.

3. A Pastor Preaches Jesus Christ

In 1 Corinthians 2:2. Paul says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Like Paul, pastors must never tire of preaching Jesus. Pastors do not preach the words of men. They do not preach themselves. They do not preach their own wisdom or man-made techniques. They preach Christ and Him crucified. Jesus Himself is the very heart of our message. All the promises of God are yes and amen in Jesus. Christ is all.

Some teachers insist that it's impossible to preach Christ from every passage of the Scriptures. They say, "Not every passage is about Jesus. We should only preach Christ when He is explicitly mentioned in the text, or when there is somehow a clear connection to Christ from a particular passage." But I want to respond briefly to that error in three ways.

First, Jesus preached Himself in all the Scriptures. Luke 24:27 says, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." If Christ preached Himself from all the Scriptures, then so should we.

Second, the Bible's covenant theology is centered on Jesus. Scripture teaches that there is only one covenant, or promise of grace, running through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation (Heb 9:15-16). Therefore, the only way to faithfully interpret any particular passage of the Bible is in light of the overarching promise of redemption for sinners in Jesus Christ.

Third, the goal of preaching is worship. If a pastor merely explains a text and doesn't hold forth Christ, then the church cannot worship, or if it does worship, it does so in spite of the sermon. It's impossible for the church to worship, unless it is set upon Jesus, who is the chief revelation of God to men. We need to see God in the face of Jesus by the Spirit speaking in His Word if we are to worship. Unless the preacher shows how Christ is at the center of every text, then he will fail to lead the congregation to worship.

What happens when Christ is faithfully preached week in and week out? Jesus Himself encourages the fainthearted, admonishes the obstinate, and gives strength of faith and obedience to all who belong to Him. Jesus begins to form His people after His image, more and more, and they begin to bear the fruit of the Spirit and keep the Ten Commandments as the very definition of what it means to love God and love men. And when Christ is preached every week, Jesus prepares His people for sufferings and trials in their lives. The whole church's eyes are set upon the things above, where Christ is, and they don't love this world too much. And more and more, the church is able to say with Paul, "To live is Christ, but to die is gain."

4. A Pastor Does Personal Work

Pastors are to love God's people personally. Personal work includes conversations with people at church, pastoral counseling, visiting hospitals, performing funerals, officiating weddings, living among people in the community, and being generally available.

Some popular preachers and teachers today say that pastors shouldn't waste their time doing personal work. They say a pastor's job is to pray, study, preach the Word, and nothing else. A pastor's work is public, not private, they say. But this is a very serious error.

Consider the many places in Scripture that show examples of personal work in pastoral ministry. Jesus ministered personally. He ministered personally to Nicodemus, to the woman at the well, to Zaccheus, to the Roman Centurion, to Mary and Martha, and to many others. He ministered at funerals, weddings, visited the sick, and He counseled people individually. Jesus also ate with His disciples, fished with them, slept with them, and lived life with them. Acts 20:27 tells us that Paul ministered the Word publicly but also house to house at Ephesus. Paul wrote a very personal letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:3 to "instruct certain men." Personal pastoral work is found all throughout the New Testament.

Personal work is important because much of a pastor's power in public teaching and preaching depends on the good will and the relationships he has with the people. People are willing to listen to a man when they know he cares for their souls. His preaching will become more and more useful to the people the more he learns who they are so that he can apply the Word to them wisely. Some parts of pastoral ministry absolutely require personal work. When people lose loved ones, or are going through severe trial, they need a pastor to help them think clearly and to set their minds on the Lord Jesus. When people are struggling with personal sin or temptation, or marriage difficulties, they need pastoral counsel about how to handle their sin wisely. When people have specific questions about the Bible or doctrine, or personal decisions that they are making in their lives, they need to feel free to approach their pastor to ask him personally.

Much of the power of true pastoral ministry depends greatly on a pastor's faithfulness to do personal work.

5. A Pastor Ministers to the Community

A faithful pastor is not merely concerned with his own church. He thinks of the lost people in the community as in Adam, under the condemnation of the covenant of works. They need the mercy of Christ in the covenant of grace. He's not cold to unbelievers in the community, but thinks of them as souls in need of a Savior. He also thinks of the other believers in the community as part of the one covenant of grace, and he sees himself and his church as joined together with them in Christ in the kingdom of God. Consider that Jesus ministered to the community throughout His life. The book of Acts shows how the Apostles and the church ministered to the community. And in 1 Timothy 3:7, Paul says that one qualification of a pastor is that he is to have a "good reputation with outsiders." How can he have a good reputation with outsiders, if no outsiders know him?

Practically, what does ministry to the community look like? It looks like participating in community events. It means being available for funerals and counseling for people in the community when asked. Getting to know people through regular business dealings with them. And getting to know other pastors and working with other churches where ever that is possible.

Pastoral ministry is both public and private. It's based on sound doctrine, rooted in personal holiness,

and centered on the Lord Jesus Christ. Pastoral work is both formal and informal, involving a whole man who seeks to minister to whole men. Pastors who are faithful and called of God have the most joyful and sanctifying calling in this world. May God give the church more faithful pastors for His great glory.