

Brothers, We Are Not Monks

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:7–12

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Pastoral ministry is hard. Period.

So it makes sense to me that when pastors get a *taste* of difficulty, they want to run away, fast. Frankly, it's not an overstatement to say that apart from a divine calling, pastoral ministry isn't all that attractive on its own. Who wants the grief, the pain, the distress, the discomfort? As Charles Schulz quipped through the *Peanuts* character Linus, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand."

The difficulty of dealing with people and their problems makes it tempting to create some distance, to become aloof, to get occupied with other things. After experiencing the pain and frustration of dealing with people, it's not uncommon to start looking for an escape hatch, a more remote location.

Like a monastery.

Any sane person would consider the monastic life to be something like a prison sentence. But busy pastors often straddle the line of sanity—to them, a monastery can sound like a five-star getaway. Quiet. Reading. Study. Contemplation. Meditation. Routine. Predictability. Compared to some of the inglorious and often thankless work of shepherding people, taking the monk's cowl can seem pretty appealing.

The problem is, it's just a bit unrealistic. More within reach is to find a better, more acceptable, even admirable way to "retreat into the monastery." Some pastors want to follow a different "leading of the Lord"—take on more oversight, join a leadership think tank, teach courses at a college or seminary, write articles and books, ascend to a ministry of "wider influence"—almost anything is preferable to the nitty-gritty of pastoral work.

None of that is necessarily wrong. Some pastors are doing those things *in addition to* shepherding the flock of God. They work hard and ought to be honored for it. On the other hand, some men *need* to get out of pastoral ministry. They simply don't belong there in the first place.

But it's important to recognize that pastoral ministry, theology, and practical Christian growth must be connected to the local church. If it's disconnected from the local church—divorced from shepherding the flock of God—then it's not God's design for the edification and growth of Christ's church. Monasteries, in whatever form, are not part of the plan.

What *is* part of the plan is the regular, routine, mundane stuff of life lived, raw and honest, with other believers in the context of the local church. The plan has to do with the joys and sorrows, the pleasures and pains, of normal human relationships.

That's why the Spirit of God provided parental pictures of pastoral leadership in Paul's ministry.

Notice what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

We proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

You know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

You can't get more tender, or more honest and personal, than a nursing mother; you can't get more real or penetrating than a clarifying conversation with a concerned father. And you can't pastor like *that* from a distance; you *definitely* can't do it from a video screen. The parental aspects of pastoral ministry require proximity, intimacy, and the investment of time.

Christ doesn't want pastors to remain aloof from people and their messy problems. He doesn't want them to theologize from the safety of an ivory tower. He wants them *involved*, intimately familiar with pain and suffering. Why? Because it's through pastoral empathy that God comforts His people.

[God] comforts us in all our affliction *so that* we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. . . . If we are afflicted, it is for *your* comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for *your* comfort . . . (2 Corinthians 1:4, 6, emphasis added).

Our theology—our study of God—teaches us never to be remote or aloof; we are to be intimately connected to the day-to-day lives of other people. We are to bring our theology out of the neat, clean, sterile environment of a classroom, and into the gritty, messy, real work of shepherding sheep. No room for that in a monastic cell.

Just look at Jesus. John 1:14-18 says Jesus tabernacled among us in full humanity to make the Father known to us (i.e., to teach us theology proper). Though He is our “great high priest who has passed through the heavens” (Hebrews 4:14), He didn't teach us about God from that lofty vantage. He came close enough “to sympathize with our weaknesses,” to be “tempted in all things as we are” (“yet without sin,” Hebrews 4:15). That's the stuff of pastoral ministry, taught by “the Chief Shepherd” Himself (1 Peter 5:4).

We experience the most profound joys and sorrows in the context of intimate human relationships. It's not by accident that God incubates our growth in the body of Christ. “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). That's how God, in His wisdom and grace, composed the body, “that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another” (1 Corinthians 12:25).

For pastor and people alike, for shepherds and sheep, there is no other way to live.

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