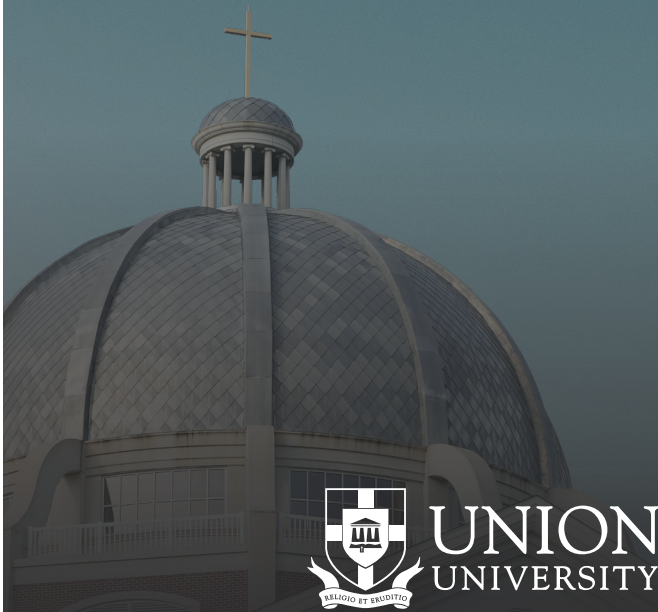


The Oversight of Souls

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Other authors in this book are dealing with the larger issues of the role of denominations and our interactions. My task is a bit smaller, taking up one important issue—pastoral ministry—and asking how we should move ahead in the future and what role denominations and interactions with broader Evangelicalism have on this issue.

I find it interesting that almost 100 years ago, W. J. McGlothlin, a professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was asking this same question. In his book, *Vital Ministry*, McGlothlin stated, “One of the most perplexing problems that confronts the young minister of to-day in America is that of the relation of himself and his

church to other churches and denominations.”¹ As much as things change, they stay the same. The professor went on to say, “Ours is apparently an age of transition.”² So, too, is our age.

Statement of the Problem

We do live in a transitional time, and we do well to consider how we should approach the future as regards pastoral ministry. Other authors have talked about how in denominational life a shift occurred from seeing the denomination as a resource for the churches to seeing the churches as franchises of the denomination. Some of the current move away from denominationalism is a reaction against this—and that is good. We need to regain the priority of the local church. In so doing we need to think carefully about the nature of pastoral ministry.

For the sake of time, let me go ahead and state what the title of my chapter already suggests. If pastoral ministry is going to thrive in our churches we need to regain an understanding of the centrality of the oversight of souls. In fact, I will argue that the heart of pastoral ministry is this attentive care of souls. For many in our day, management is considered the central aspect of pastoral ministry. For many others, preaching is the most fundamental aspect of pastoral ministry. The renewed emphasis on substantive preaching in many quarters is to be celebrated, but preaching is not the heart of pastoral ministry; rather, preaching is an outflow of oversight. We do not guard souls in order to preach. Rather we preach as one means of guarding souls.

Our central task is not managing good programs, drawing large crowds, or even delivering powerful messages. Our central task is shepherding souls as they depart the City of Destruction and hazard their way toward the Celestial City.

It is so easy to forget this or to miss it altogether. When we do, all else is skewed. Ministry to masses can overshadow the needs of

¹ W. J. McGlothlin, *A Vital Ministry* (New York: Fleming-Revell, 1913), 171.

² *Ibid.*, 172.

individuals, programs can replace people, and sermons can become lightweight pep talks or, even when soundly biblical, they can end up abstract lectures which fail to provide real guidance for people as they struggle with sin, self, and Satan.

Put simply, our current setting will, if given half a chance, suck all the personal pastoral care and concern out of our ministries, and replace it with slick professionalism which is efficient but impersonal and lacking in spiritual power.

This lack is being noticed and is showing up in the growing number of books on the discontent of believers with church. One such book is Julia Duin's *Quitting Church*. Based on wide and varied interviews, Duin discussed several reasons why otherwise mature believers were deeply disaffected with the church. Among those reasons was the lack of pastoral care. She wrote, "My research suggested that people simply were not being pastored. Often ministers are out of touch with what's happening on the ground."³

She cited difficulties people had getting in touch with their pastors or finding care and guidance for their souls. People often felt they were just supposed to attend mass meetings, fill their cog in the machine, and not expect anything more. They did not feel shepherded, or that anyone was engaging their day-to-day world.

In her work Duin interviewed Eugene Peterson, who perhaps as much as anyone in our day has thought and written profoundly on the importance of shepherding God's flock. Duin wrote about her interview:

It's the job of pastors, he added, to know about their sheep and not dump the job on a subordinate. "People deserve to have their name known," he said. "They deserve to have somebody who is a spiritual guide and a preacher and pastor to them and who has had a cup of coffee in the kitchen. There is so much alienation, so much loneliness around us. Classically, that is what

³ Julia Duin, *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 22–23.

a pastor does. We've lost that. Of course some people think I'm out to lunch because we don't do that in America. We do something big and influential and cost-efficient. Well, a pastoral life is not cost-efficient, I'll tell you. You don't spend three hours in a nursing home and come away feeling like you've been cost-efficient."⁴

Calvin Miller has written winsomely on this issue in his book, *O Shepherd, Where Art Thou?* He states, "Most often when people do leave the church they are leaving because they feel the church failed to minister to them in a time of need. Yet pastors are often more stimulated to make their church grow than to take care of its members in their needy times. No one ever gets his or her picture in an Evangelical magazine simply because they visited the sick."⁵

Of course people are not free to give up on the church just because they are dissatisfied, but we would do well to hear the complaints that are being given to see what substance they have. Duin's research, for example, traced the lack of connectedness so many people feel, even in places where good sermons are being given. Good preaching is essential. It is just not all that is needed. Larry Crabb has provocatively written:

Perhaps it is time to screw up our courage and attack the sacred cow: we must admit that simply knowing the contents of the Bible is not a sure route to spiritual growth. There is an awful assumption in evangelical circles that if we can just get the Word of God into people's heads, then the Spirit of God will apply it to their hearts. That assumption is awful, not because the Spirit never does what the assumption supposes, but because it has excused pastors and leaders from the responsibility to tangle with people's lives. Many remain safely hidden behind pulpits, hopelessly out of touch with the struggles of their congregations,

⁴ Ibid., 126.

⁵ Calvin Miller, *O Shepherd, Where Art Thou?* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 42.

proclaiming the Scriptures with a pompous accuracy that touches no one.⁶

Now that is a tough statement. It may be overstated, but there is truth here. It is too easy to remain aloof from our people, failing to get our hands dirty in the day-to-day business of applying the truths we preach. This reality has been understood and addressed through the history of the church, and we need to consider this once again.

If we are in earnest about the salvation of souls, we must labor in the teaching of the Word and in the careful oversight of the souls of our flock. These two activities cannot rightly be divorced. John Angell James, in his classic book on pastoral ministry, *An Earnest Ministry*, stated, “Good preaching and good shepherding are quite compatible with each other, and he who is in earnest will combine both.”⁷

Careful oversight may not make us famous, since people cannot download our oversight to their iPods, but our preaching cannot be what it ought to be without this care for individual souls.

In this talk I want to look again at the Scriptures and the witness of the church through the ages to discern what the heart of pastoral ministry should be. We need to look to the past in order to give perspective to our contemporary conversations. If we only listen to ourselves and our contemporaries we can fool ourselves into thinking a certain idea is the only way to think, when in fact we may be the first people in history to think this way. By thinking along with the best minds of previous generations we can be, as C. S. Lewis put it, rescued from “the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone” of our own age.⁸

If you look through the history of the church you find that the importance of the oversight of souls is not a Baptist distinctive. It is not even limited to Evangelicalism. It is truly part of the Great

⁶ Larry Crabb, *Inside Out* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1988), 160.

⁷ John Angell James, *An Earnest Ministry: The Want of Our Times* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth), 149.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time,” in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980), 58–59.

Tradition. It is thus fitting that we notice it at this conference. This is an issue where Christians can and should unite.

I cannot here cover all the relevant scriptural texts or historical affirmations. I will focus on some key texts, and then in the discussion of these texts use selected quotes from across the range (chronologically and ecclesiastically) of church history. We could discuss the texts without these quotes but I am using them to demonstrate that this reading of Scripture is not unique but is the common voice of the church.

Scriptural Texts on Pastoral Ministry

We are not at a loss for texts on this topic, although it seems they are not referenced enough. When thinking of the pastor's role we ought first look to Jesus Himself, the "great Shepherd of the sheep" (Heb 13:20). In John 10:11–15 (HCSB), Jesus describes Himself as the true shepherd, and in so doing gives us a picture of what true under-shepherds should be as well:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and doesn't own the sheep, leaves them and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. This happens because he is a hired man and doesn't care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know My own sheep, and they know Me, as the Father knows Me, and I know the Father. I lay down My life for the sheep.

Undoubtedly one reason the term "pastor" or "shepherd" is used in the NT is to connect with the work and example of Jesus as the Great Shepherd. Notice first of all the care given to the sheep. The true under-shepherd must be one who does not run at the approach of danger. Rather, he is one who stands at his post defending the sheep, even giving his life if necessary. In the fourth century John Chrysostom applied this passage to pastoral ministry, stating, "A great thing, beloved, a great thing is the role of leader in the Church. It

is one that requires much wisdom, and as great courage as Christ's words indicate: namely, sufficient to lay down one's life for the sheep; sufficient never to leave them unprotected and exposed to danger; and sufficient to stand firm against the attack of the wolf."⁹

Notice also that Jesus explicitly says He knows His sheep. There is no way to guard the sheep if you do not know them.

Alexander Maclaren, commenting on this passage, wrote:

Individualising care and tender knowledge of each are marks of the true shepherd. To call by name implies this and more. To a stranger all sheep are alike; the shepherd knows them apart. It is a beautiful picture of loving intimacy, lowliness, care, and confidence, and one which every teacher should ponder. Contrast this with the Pharisees' treatment of the blind man.¹⁰

More on this later.¹¹

Next, we look at perhaps the key text in this discussion, Heb 13:17 (HCSB), "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."

Notice that this passage posits significant authority in the pastors (and it is not really softened by translating "obey" as "be persuaded by"). Notice also, though, that this authority is directly tied to the work of watching over souls. Pastors have authority in the church

⁹ John Chrysostom, "Homily 60," in *Saint John Chrysostom: Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist (Homilies 48–88)*, vol. 41 of *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), 133.

¹⁰ Alexander Maclaren, *The Gospel of St. John*, Bible Class Expositions (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893), 106.

¹¹ After studying this passage in my pastoral ministry class, one student wrote: "This passage is an encouragement to me as one who feels called to preach the Word of God. If I become a pastor, I must love the sheep like Jesus did. I must be willing to die for my flock and guard my flock from wolves. I must be willing to encourage and rebuke my flock and always do what is for their eternal good. I must set an example for them in everything so that their faith may not be shaken by my poor leadership. What an enormous responsibility awaits me. May I never take it lightly."

precisely because they are to be guarding souls. And, then, Scripture makes the important point that pastors are to engage the work of this oversight in a manner shaped by the realization that God will call them to account. Here we are given a clear statement about what God expects of pastors and for what He will hold us accountable on the final day. No mention is made of drawing crowds, erecting buildings, or managing programs. Those things may be fine, but what matters is the oversight of souls.

Now, what is meant here by “keep watch over [your] souls”? The term is used elsewhere with the sense of watchfulness, staying awake, guarding, and protecting. We are to keep watch over our congregations, protecting them and guiding them by providing clear biblical teaching and personally rebuking and encouraging. As John Owen in the seventeenth century wrote:

And the apostle compriseth herein the whole duty of the pastoral office. . . . The work and design of these rulers [pastors] is solely to take care of your souls, by all means to preserve them from evil, sin, backsliding; to instruct them and feed them; to promote their faith and obedience; that they may be led safely to eternal rest. For this end is their office appointed and herein do they labour continually.¹²

This idea is why Martin Bucer, leader of the Reformation in Strasbourg in the sixteenth century, titled his treatise on pastoral ministry, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*. It is striking also that he refers to a pastor as *Seelsorger*, a “carer of souls.”¹³

This will require personal knowledge of the sheep. It will not be accomplished merely by sermons fired at random. We again must be like the Good Shepherd who pursues the wandering sheep. This task cannot be fulfilled in the pulpit alone. It requires us to commit

¹² John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1855), 465.

¹³ Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), vii.

to following up with our people. At the church where I serve, we commit to our people, saying, “We will love you enough to chase you down should you ever wander away. You can choose to break your connection with us but you will not just slip away and be forgotten.”

John Erskine, an eighteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian, wrote:

Sermons, like arrows shot at a venture, seldom hit the mark when we do not know the character of our hearers; and, in many instances, our knowledge of their character must be imperfect if we contract no familiarity with them.¹⁴

Similarly, Charles Brown, in Scotland in the nineteenth century, also wrote:

After a long ministry I do not hesitate to express my belief, that . . . the best preaching will lose much of its power without the systematic visiting of the flock at their homes. Not only must the minister remain thus a stranger, to a large extent, to their condition and necessities, and so have to preach to them very much at random, but he shall fail of securing that kindly esteem and affectionate confidence at their hands, without which, however he may win their mere respect by his pulpit ministrations, his preaching will probably fail to a great extent of its grand use and end. As the people will most surely bid that minister right welcome to their homes whose voice they hear with joy on the Sabbaths, so will they return with fresh and ever-growing joy to the church, to listen to *his* voice whom they have found the sympathizing friend and counselor of their loved families.¹⁵

A similar point was made by a nineteenth-century New England Congregationalist, Silas Aiken:

¹⁴ John Erskine, “Difficulties of the Pastoral Office,” in *The Christian Pastor’s Manual* 1826, ed. John Brown (1826, 1991; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2003), 191–92. Erskine goes on to comment on how difficult this is with a large congregation.

¹⁵ Charles J. Brown, *The Ministry: Addresses to Students of Divinity* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2006), 84.

A particular oversight and care of the flock . . . is involved in the idea of the pastoral work . . . and can no more be pushed aside or ignored, than any other part. . . . The man who assumes the sacred office, and, in the neglect of the personal inspection and private instruction of the souls committed to his care, thinks to discharge his obligations by his pulpit labors, is sadly derelict in duty. He sets aside the scriptural model, and sets up a standard of his own devising instead.¹⁶

This is what is in view when the NT refers to pastors as “overseers.” This does not refer to “management” in our business model, but to the task of overseeing souls, watching out for the flock, fighting off wolves, and pursuing wandering sheep.

This theme is also found in Peter’s exhortation to pastors in 1 Pet 5:1–4 (HCSB):

Therefore, as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of the Messiah and also a participant in the glory about to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you: Shepherd God’s flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but freely, according to God’s will; not for the money but eagerly; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Here we are told to “shepherd” and to “exercise oversight.” These two activities cannot be fully covered by preaching. Certainly preaching is an important element, but shepherding in these contexts would also conjure up the image of guarding, pursuing, and personal care.

These themes also show up in Paul’s farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:18–21,28 (HCSB):

And when they came to him, he said to them: “You know, from the first day I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole

¹⁶ Silas Aiken, “On Pastoral Duties,” *The Congregational Quarterly* 8 (January 1866): 30.

time—serving the Lord with all humility, with tears, and with the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews—and that I did not shrink back from proclaiming to you anything that was profitable or from teaching it to you in public and from house to house. I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus. . . . Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock that the Holy Spirit has appointed you to as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood.

This passage is significant as Paul’s summary of his ministry. Some at this point might find yourselves saying, “But the apostles in Acts 6 said their priority was to be the ministry of the Word and prayer. How does this fit with what you are saying?” This passage shows how it fits very well. Paul shows here that his “ministry of the Word” involved not only public proclamation but also proclamation “from house to house.” If we would follow the apostolic pattern we must give public and private instruction. As we spend time with our people we speak truth to them in the midst of everyday life as well as preaching it on Sunday. In our own day when people so easily think of a rigid divide between the sacred and the secular, this everyday, private ministry is so important in showing that what is discussed in church is really supposed to be lived out in daily life.

This is also affirmed in the *Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (1645), which says, “It is the duty of the minister not only to teach the people committed to his charge in public, but privately; and particularly to admonish, exhort, reprove, and comfort them, upon all reasonable occasions, so far as his time, strength, and personal safety will permit.”¹⁷

¹⁷ “Concerning Visitation of the Sick,” in *The Directory for the Public Worship of God, Agreed Upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster 1645* (1845; repr., New York: Robert Kennedy, 1880), 32.

Also in this time period, Richard Baxter wrote, “I fear most those ministers who preach well, and who are unsuited to the private nurture of their members.”¹⁸

This sort of ministry grows out of real care and affection for our people. This is simply not a task that can be done with our hearts carefully tucked away. I have often heard young pastors counseled not to get too close to their church members. They are encouraged to keep a “professional” or even “prophetic” distance. In one case the advice was that getting too close would make it too difficult to deliver rebuke when needed. This advice is not only unhelpful, it is downright ungodly! Rebuke ought not be delivered if it is too easy. It is the wounds of a friend that are faithful, not the cool correction of a hired hand.

Such distance is not the biblical model. Notice what Paul said in 1 Thess 2:1,7–12,19–20:

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our visit with you was not without result. . . . Although we could have been a burden as Christ’s apostles, instead we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother nurtures her own children. We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember our labor and hardship, brothers. Working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God’s gospel to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how devoutly, righteously, and blamelessly we conducted ourselves with you believers. As you know, like a father with his own children, we encouraged, comforted, and implored each one of you to walk worthy of God, who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. . . . For who is our hope or joy or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy!

¹⁸ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), rev. ed., ed. James M. Houston (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982), 7.

Does this sound like a man who has been careful not to get his affections wrapped up with his people? Of course not! The only way we will work “night and day” is if our people become “dear to us.” This sort of affection will only grow as you get to know them, walk with them, share in their joys and sorrows, and permit them to walk alongside you, sharing your joys and griefs as well. Then we will treat them like gentle mothers and concerned fathers.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, is known for being fiery and even rough. Yet notice how he speaks of love for the congregation:

Men who hold the office of the ministry should have the heart of a mother toward the church; for if they have no such heart, they soon become lazy and disgusted, and suffering, in particular, will find them unwilling. . . . Unless your heart toward the sheep is like that of a mother toward her children—a mother, who walks through fire to save her children—you will not be fit to be a preacher. Labor, work, unthankfulness, hatred, envy, and all kinds of sufferings will meet you in this office. If, then, the mother heart, the great love, is not there to drive the preachers, the sheep will be poorly served.¹⁹

Moving forward one century, to the seventeenth, Samuel Rutherford is a powerful example of deep affection for one’s congregation. Having been torn away from his people and exiled for his devotion to the gospel, Rutherford wrote letters to his people exhorting, counseling, challenging, and teaching them. The collection of these letters is now considered a spiritual classic. In one letter he addressed his congregation as a whole:

Dearly beloved and longed-for in the Lord, my crown and my joy in the day of Christ, Grace be to you, and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, “Ministers,” in *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (1959; repr., Saint Louis: Concordia, 1994), 932.

I long exceedingly to know if the oft-spoken-of match betwixt you and Christ holdeth, and if ye follow on to know the Lord. My day-thoughts and my night-thoughts are of you; while ye sleep I am afraid of your souls, that they be off the rock. Next to my Lord Jesus and this fallen kirk, ye have the greatest share of my sorrow, and also of my joy; ye are the matter of the tears, care, fear, and daily prayers of an oppressed prisoner of Christ. As I am in bonds for my high and lofty One, my royal and princely Master, my Lord Jesus; so I am in bonds for you. . . . What could I want, if my ministry among you should make a marriage between the little bride in those bounds and the Bridegroom? Oh, how rich a prisoner were I, if I could obtain of my Lord (before whom I stand for you) the salvation of you all! Oh, what a prey had I gotten, to have you caught in Christ's net! Oh, then I had cast out my Lord's lines and His net with a rich gain! Oh then, well-wared pained breast, and sore back, and crazed body, in speaking early and late to you! . . . My witness is above; your heaven would be two heavens to me, and the salvation of you all as two salvations to me. I would subscribe a suspension, and a fristing of my heaven for many hundred years (according to God's good pleasure), if ye were sure in the upper lodging, in our Father's house, before me.²⁰

This is a pastor's heart!

When we have this sort of affection for our people we will be able to say of our churches the sort of thing we find the apostle Paul saying, "For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord" (1 Thess 3:8 ESV). This also explains Paul's description of his pastoral aims in Col 1:24–29 (ESV, emphasis added):

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for

²⁰ "Letter 225," *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, n.d.), 438–39.

you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, *warning everyone* and *teaching everyone* with all wisdom, that we may *present everyone mature in Christ*. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Part of what is striking in this passage is the emphasis on individuals. Paul sought to warn and teach each member with the goal of presenting each one mature in Christ. This aim should animate our ministries. Too often today leaders are content with seeing maturity or even attendance in a “significant percentage” of the membership. But this is not Paul’s aim. We are to labor and suffer to see that *each one* attains maturity in Christ. John Calvin wrote, “The office of a true and faithful minister is not only publicly to teach the people over whom he is ordained to pastor, but, so far as may be, to admonish, exhort, rebuke, and console each one in particular.”²¹

One of the early Baptist confessions of faith includes the following affirmation:

That the members of every church or congregation ought to know one another, so they may perform all the duties of love to one another, both spiritually and physically (Matt 18:15; 1 Thess 5:14; 1 Cor 12:25). And especially the elders ought to know the whole flock over which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2–3). Therefore a church ought not to consist of such a multitude that each member cannot have individual knowledge of one another.²²

²¹ John Calvin, “Visitation of the Sick,” in *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, vol. 2, ed. by H. Beveridge (1849; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 127.

²² “A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland” (1611), in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed., ed. by William L. Lumpkin (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1959), 121.

Furthermore, Henry Scougal (1650–78), prominent Scottish pastor and theologian who profoundly influenced both Whitefield and the Wesleys, wrote:

But certainly the greatest and most difficult work of a minister is in applying himself particularly to the various persons under his charge; to acquaint himself with their behavior and the temper of their souls; to redress what is amiss and prevent their future miscarriages. Without this private work, his other endeavors will do little good. . . . Now this supposes a great deal of care, to acquaint ourselves with the humors and conversation of our people; and the name of “watchmen” that is given to us implies no less.²³

Baxter, considered by some to be the consummate pastor, wrote eloquently on this subject in *The Reformed Pastor*. Here are some pertinent samples that sum up the argument to this point:

But our second concern must also be for *individuals* in the church. We need therefore to know every person that belongs to our charge. For how can we take heed to them unless we know them? We should know completely those in our flock. As a careful shepherd looks after every individual sheep, or as a good schoolmaster looks after every individual student, or as a good doctor knows each of his patients—in these ways we should know them. Christ Himself, the great and good Shepherd, takes care of every individual. . . . We, too, must give an account of our watch over the souls of all that are bound to obey us (Heb 13:7). Many more passages of Scripture assure us that it is our duty to take heed to every individual person that is in our flock. And many passages in the ancient church council do plainly tell us that it was also the practice in those days to do likewise. In one passage, Ignatius says, “Let assemblies be often gathered; inquire into all by name, despise not servant-men or maidens.” So you

²³ “On the Importance and Difficulty of the Ministerial Function,” in *The Works of the Rev. Henry Scougal* (1765), reprint, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 241, 252.

see it was then taken as a duty to look upon every member of the flock by name, even if it should be the meanest servant-man or maid. . . . A faithful pastor should have his eyes on them all. He should labor to know each person's natural temperament, their situations, and the context of their affairs in the world. A pastor should be aware of the company they live with and deal with, so that he may know where their temptations lie. Thus he knows speedily, prudently, and diligently how to help them.²⁴

In summing up his book, Baxter gives 20 points on the benefits of attending to each individual in the congregation. In this context he makes these statements:

But when a minister does not know his own people, he is not able to really minister to them. By means of such personal ministry we come to be better acquainted with each one's spiritual state. Then we know better how to watch over them and relate to them. . . . They should see us not as simply necessary for their emergency situations. They should see themselves as disciples or scholars who are being taught by their pastors through personal advice and given help for their salvation.²⁵

Now some at this point may say, "Fine, but I have not seen much Baptist representation in your historical quotes." Well, here are a few to show the solidarity of Baptists with this stream of thought.

P. H. Mell was a messenger at the founding of the SBC who went on to serve as its president, 14 or more years. Mell was known as a powerful, doctrinal preacher. His biographer records this account of his ministry:

Very much of his power as a preacher lay in the way he had of getting close to his people. His custom was to visit *all* of them, and so anxious were they not to miss the expected pleasure that he made engagements ahead often as far as three months. The

²⁴ Baxter, 71–72, 76.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 107–8.

humblest householder was glad to entertain “Brother Mell,” and the same ease of manner characterized him whether he sat at the bountiful board of the rich, or broth the plain bread and partook of the cup of milk from the pine table of the poorest. . . . If a poor man was harassed with debt, broken hearted over a willful child, or bowed down with bereavement, he never felt his load to be quite so heavy after he had talked it over with “Brother Mell.”²⁶

Moving to a Baptist in the Northeast, Hezekiah Harvey was a prolific Baptist pastor and professor at Hamilton Theological Seminary. In his treatise on pastoral ministry, he wrote:

The care of souls is the radical idea of the pastor’s office. He is a shepherd to whom a flock has been committed to guide, to feed, to defend; and the divine command enjoins: “Take heed to *all* the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). He is to be the personal religious guide, the confidential Christian friend, of his charge. Our Lord, in his description of the Good Shepherd, said, “The sheep hear his voice; and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him; for they know his voice” (John 10:3–4). Each member of his flock is a soul entrusted to his care by the Lord; and if true to his trust, he is one of those who “watch for souls as they must give account.” Paul, when in Ephesus, taught not only publicly, but “from house to house”; and in his farewell charge to the elders of that city he said, “Watch, and remember that, by the space of three years, I ceased not to warn every man night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31).²⁷

²⁶ P. H. Mell Jr., *The Life of Patrick Hues Mell* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1991), 61–62.

²⁷ Hezekiah Harvey, *The Pastor: His Qualifications and Duties* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1879), 78.

Then there is Charles Bray Williams, who was founding NT professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, president of Mercer, and professor at Union University where he published his translation of the NT. Throughout this work he was also a pastor. His daughter, Charlotte Williams Sprawls, has written a biographical sketch of her father in which she recollects his ministry in his 80s when he was pastoring a 700+ member church. She wrote, “[he] believed strongly in a pastor’s knowing personally every member in his church, and he had a very active plan of visitation of every family in their home every few weeks.”²⁸ That is quite a testimony for a man at that age and church of that size.

Lastly, I could point to W. A. Criswell, who in his guidebook for pastors writes:

The shepherd tending his flock, the pastor living in love and encouragement among his people, is the picture the New Testament presents of this God-called servant. . . . Prayer, even fervent prayer, is not enough, nor is prayer plus incessant Bible study enough. We must live with our people, minister to our people, encourage, and guide our people. . . . If the pastor would really succeed in his work, let him minister to the needs of his people. . . . The pastor who knows, loves, visits, and ministers to his flock has a place in their hearts sacred forever. . . . The example of the great pastors of the world is always one of personal contact with the people. The pulpit is the throne of the preacher, but the throne is not stable unless it rests on the affections of the people. To win the affections of the people, you must visit with them and know them and talk to them and let them talk to you. The man with whom you have wisely and tenderly conversed on vital, personal religion cannot turn a cold,

²⁸ Charlotte Williams Sprawls, *Charles Bray Williams: Greek Scholar, Professor, Writer, Pastor and Preacher, 1896–1952; Translator of “The New Testament in the Language of the People”* (Graceville, FL: Florida Baptist Historical Society, 2007), 12.

critical ear toward you on the Lord's Day, nor does he. The man who visits has the love of the people.²⁹

Conclusion

The oversight of souls is the heart of pastoral ministry. From this effort of caring for souls comes preaching, visiting, counseling, and everything else a pastor does. We preach in order to guard and guide souls. We pray for them that they might hate sin, love God, be encouraged, and persevere. We visit and counsel so that we might point them in the way of truth and overcome the snares of sin. And, while there are various reasons why we pursue personal holiness, one reason is the fear of harming our dear people.

Brothers, let us shepherd God's sheep. He bought them with His own blood! Is there anything more valuable, more worthy of our attention? His saving of them was not haphazard or random. Neither should our care of them be.

On the final day we will be called to give an account before God Himself, and He will not inquire of our buildings, programs, and such. He has told us ahead of time that He will examine how we cared for the souls of those entrusted to our care. Let us consider this soberly and pursue our ministries accordingly. This will likely have radical implications for what we do and how we do it. Let us pursue this goal relentlessly since it is the clear command of our Master, the Great Shepherd of the Sheep. Let us imitate Him that we might please Him and know His pleasure in our lives.

Fellow pastors, we have been entrusted with a group of people who are feeble and frail, who still struggle with sin and get frightened and overwhelmed. Our task is to guide them faithfully on to heaven, fighting off the wolves, warning of snares, even chasing out false sheep.

²⁹ W. A. Criswell, *Criswell's Guidebook for Pastors* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 273–75.

Horatius Bonar, that wonderful Scottish pastor, ardent evangelist, and hymn writer, said it well:

To this extent the office of the elder and the minister is the same. The design of both is *the oversight of souls*. . . . Oh! Remember, then, that it is for the care of souls that you have been now ordained; it is for souls that you are to labour, and watch, and pray; and it is for souls that you are to give an account when the great Shepherd shall appear.³⁰

May we be found faithful in this task.

³⁰ Horatius Bonar, "The Union Between Christ and Believers, and the Union of Believers One With Another: A Discourse," *The Scottish Christian Herald* 2 (Jan.–Dec. 1840): 748.

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