

A First Century Job Description for Twenty-First Century Pastors

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Acknowledgement: John Stott, *Calling Christian Leaders* (2002), ch. 5

There's a story that John Cowan tells about a magazine photographer who is assigned to get some photos of a forest fire. When he arrives at the airport, the plane is warming up near the runway. He jumps in with his equipment and yells, "Let's go! Let's go!" The pilot swings the plane into the wind and they're soon in the air. The photographer yells out, "Fly over the north side of the fire, and make three or four low level passes." The pilot asks, "Why?" "Because I'm going to take some pictures. I'm a photographer and photographers do that sort of thing!" "What!" cries the pilot, "You mean you're not the instructor?"

I wonder if that story could be a kind of metaphor or parable for the experience of many people in pastoral ministry today. There's a lot of confusion about the nature or the role of pastoral leaders. I imagine that some of you who are graduating today will find yourself in the pilot's seat at some point, like I have, wondering, "What on earth am *I* doing here?!" It's because our current models of ministry are sometimes shaped more by culture than by Scripture. So what I want to do today is to briefly wave in front of your noses a biblical flight plan or biblical job description for pastoral ministry. In 1 Corinthians chapter 4 Paul outlines four essentials for authentic pastoral leadership.

Servants of Christ (1a)

First of all Paul says to the Corinthians in verse 1: **[Slide 1]** "You ought to regard us" – that is, the apostles, the first leaders of the church, and by implication all pastoral leaders – "as servants of Christ." Fundamental to

being a minister or servant of the church is being a minister or servant of Christ, cultivating an attentive, obedient relationship with the Lord Jesus. He's the one, Paul goes on to say, to whom we will have to give an account one day. So he's the one from whom we need now to be taking our instructions. But it's so easy to overlook this.

I remember when I was starting out I asked an older pastor who I was trying to emulate: "How many hours do you work each week?" Guess what he said. "About 80 hours." I thought, "I need to work a bit harder." One morning, several months later, I was sitting in our living room listening to a song by *Delirious*. It's got a line about Jesus that goes: "Isn't He Beautiful?" And I just started bawling, blubbing like a baby. I was just so frantic, so busy trying to serve the church, that my connection with Jesus had grown embarrassingly thin.

My experience is that our contemporary models of ministry, when they become preoccupied with numerical growth as the one essential mark of "success", encourage this kind of "unchecked activism". But pastoral ministry is not so much about doing as it is about being, being with Jesus, listening to Jesus, serving Jesus. As Henri Nouwen said: "If there is one focus that the Christian leader of the future will need, it is the discipline of dwelling in the presence of the One who keeps asking us, "Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?" It is the discipline of contemplative prayer. Through contemplative prayer we can keep ourselves from being pulled from one urgent issue to another and from becoming strangers to our own and God's heart."

Stewards of the Gospel (1b-2)

So, first of all, remember that you are servants of Christ. **[Slide 2]** But

Paul goes on to say that pastoral leaders are "those entrusted with the secret things of God" or, as one translation puts it, "We are stewards of the mysteries of God" (1b). We are stewards of the gospel, a gospel that has been revealed to us and entrusted to us in the Scriptures, that we might in turn teach it to others. That's our job. And "it is required", Paul says in v 2, "that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."

It's so easy not to be a faithful steward. A few weeks ago one of our kids, little two-year-old Sophie, came down with a vomiting bug. She was a sick little girl. Now Lorraine had been carefully nursing her on the couch, surrounded by towels to catch any discharge. But she needed to dash off to the toilet, so she asked me to mind Sophie just for a minute, in case she vomited. Sophie was entrusted to me. So I sat with her, but I thought "I could make a quick telephone call." So I did, forgetting that as a male I really only have the capacity to do one thing at a time. While I was talking, Sophie got off the couch. I didn't notice. She staggered to the middle of the house. I didn't notice. She vomited everywhere. I still didn't notice – until Lorraine kindly brought to my attention that I had not proven to be a faithful steward. I got distracted.

In pastoral ministry, it's easy to get distracted. There are programmes to run, staff to supervise, board meetings to attend, strategic plans to develop. These things can all be good, but they're demonic if they distract you from your calling to teach the Scriptures to God's people. You are not a CEO. Your job is not to finding that strategy or that programme or that marketing plan that will increase the church's membership. Your job is to faithfully teach the Scriptures. And that will mean diligent, ongoing study.

I remember during my time at Carey Martin Sutherland saying to us, "Get into a habit of aggressive reading. Make it a point each week to spend

about 8 hours reading beyond the scope of next Sunday's sermon. Unless you keep nourishing the soil of your mind with this kind of study, you won't be able to sustain a fruitful long-term teaching ministry." I thought, "Come on Martin. That's a little unrealistic, don't you think?" But painful experience has brought me to the conviction that he was right. If you want to be a faithful steward of the gospel, commit yourself to a programme of rigorous ongoing study.

Scum of the Earth (8-13)

This brings us to a third characteristic of authentic pastoral ministry, a third bullet point on Paul's job description. [**Slide 3**] He says in v13 that, because he and his companions have faithfully proclaimed the Gospel entrusted to them, they "have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world". On a literal level, "scum" and "refuse" refer here to the peelings on a kitchen floor that get swept into the rubbish or the grime in dirty pots that gets washed down the sink. But in Paul's day, when a city was stricken by some calamity like the plague, a few poor individuals were sometimes taken from the community and tossed into the sea and drowned. They were scapegoats, and they were called the "scum" of society. Paul is saying in this passage: "That's what we are. That's how we're treated. You Corinthians may be very comfortable, but we're not. We're persecuted. We're suffering."

And the truth is that being an obedient servant of Christ and a faithful steward of the gospel will mean that you will suffer. Expect it. You've probably heard the advice: "Before you criticise someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes. That way, when you criticise them, you're a mile away and you have their shoes." Well, some of your people won't bother to walk a mile in your shoes first. They'll criticise you thoughtlessly and

painfully. Sometimes their criticism will be justified. But sometimes their criticism – and your suffering – will simply be the badge that proves you're being faithful to your call.

Fathers of the Family (14-21)

Servants of Christ. Stewards of the Gospel. Scum of the Earth. One more image: [Slide 4] fathers of a family. Paul says in v 14: "I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel."

In Paul's world a "guardian" was usually a slave who was charged with instructing and disciplining his master's children. His motivation was a dull sense of duty. He didn't need to care about the children. Paul, by contrast, says that he is motivated by the kind of tender affection that a father feels for his children. That's why he goes on in v 16 to gently say, "I urge you to imitate me". He wants them to grow up and become mature in their faith.

We've all had a glimpse of this kind of impulse with the tragic story of Madeleine McCann. For weeks Gerry and Kate McCann have clung desperately, irrationally to the faint hope that their little girl might still be alive somewhere, and might yet be reunited with them. Why? They are parents. And the desire of their hearts is to see their daughter grow up into maturity. What parent wouldn't? That, Paul says, is the heart of pastoral ministry. Pastoral leaders are to be father-like, mother-like, in the way they seek to grow their people up to full maturity in the faith. The problem is that this pastoral model of ministry is being supplanted by more managerial forms of ministry. The focus is more on growing massive

churches, than on growing mature Christians.

The constant pressure on you will be to find leaders to run ministries, or donors to finance projects. And what can happen, Eugene Peterson says, is that we end up treating people like resources to be exploited, when they are people to be loved. You end up turning "what God created as a human community of men and women whose glory it is to love one another into a depersonalised wasteland of important roles and efficient functions." The irony is that if, with God's grace, you choose to forget about trying to be "successful" and growing a big church, and focus instead on growing those within your church family into full maturity, forming them into a loving and authentic community, then outsiders will almost certainly be attracted. And God will be honoured. So here's a biblical job description for the role that you are taking up. Here are four essentials for pastoral leadership. You're to be servants of Christ, stewards of the gospel, the scum of the earth, and fathers to a family.

I pray that it may be so.