

---

## Who Pastors the Pastor?

In any church, the minister of the gospel also needs to *receive* the ministry of the gospel. Like the rest of the congregation, he is sinful and in need of encouragement and rebuke. He needs to grow in holiness and love of the brothers.

We neglect the spiritual care of the pastor to our cost. A spiritually bankrupt pastor has no resources with which to do his job—the job of encouraging and leading his flock.

But whose responsibility is it? Who should pastor the pastor?

(NB: throughout this paper, we will use the word ‘pastor’ to refer to the person placed in charge of a congregation—the minister, teaching elder, rector, or whatever else you might call him.)

---

### Unbiblical Responses

There are two wrong responses to the problem: one is to rely on other ‘professional’ pastors for encouragement; the other is to rely on denominational officials.

Depending on other pastors to encourage *your* pastor creates an elite class that is inconsistent with Scripture. Of course, it is natural that people who have trained for the ministry together, or who have been associated in some way in the past, should turn to each other for advice and encouragement. But for a congregation to unload the spiritual care of their pastor onto his fellow professionals is extremely unwise. It places him in a different class, as if something more substantial than the application of the Word of God to his life is required. If the pastor does not confess his sins to, and receive encouragement from, his ‘laymen’, an unbiblical hierarchy is created.

Building this hierarchy along denominational lines is

even more unbiblical. Moderators and Presidents and Bishops are not in the New Testament at all! If we give the denominational officials the job of ‘ministering to the minister’, we not only set up a pattern that is quite foreign to the New Testament, but we are left with a further unresolved question—who ministers to the bishops? If you say, “Cardinals”, you are only a short step away from having a pope. If you say, “other bishops”, you have fallen into the error in the previous paragraph.

To think that denominational officials will meet the spiritual needs of pastors is not only unbiblical—it is impractical as well. In most denominations there are far too few officials to even begin to do the job. And it would cost us far too much to employ extra people to do it. The average pastor can look after a congregation of about 150. He speaks to them all at least once each week (during the church meeting) and catches up with all of them personally at regular intervals. He can share informal times with them, get to know them, and be in a position to offer encouragement and fellowship.

A denominational official, sitting in an office in the city, has no hope of conducting this sort of ministry to the ministers allegedly in his care. There are few opportunities to meet together, and even fewer chances for informal chats.

Both of these responses fail to take account of some significant New Testament themes: the priesthood of all believers, our equal standing before God, our equal humility before the Word, and our equal partnership in ministry. The congregation must minister to itself. One or two members of that congregation may be freed from normal employment to work full-time to serve the members, but they never cease to be members of the congregation, which is the body of Christ. The church members must love and serve each other. Why should one or two members be exempt?

Whatever associations we might have outside our churches, and whatever encouragement or help we might receive from these, the focus of our ministry should be our church.

---

## **So who pastors the pastor?**

“Confess your sins to one another” says James in the fifth chapter of his letter, and it is an old Protestant joke to say, “But we can’t find the Rev. One Another anywhere!”.

All the same, it is sad that we have forgotten our Protestant heritage and no longer regard the pastor as being as much in need of rebuke and encouragement as the rest of us. We have

lost sight of the New Testament model of mutual ministry. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-2).

The congregation should pastor their pastor. This is not only in keeping with the emphasis of the New Testament, but is far more practical. The congregation is in the best position to care for their pastor. In the web of personal relationships between a pastor and the members of his congregation, there is ample opportunity for sharing spiritual things, for encouragement and for rebuke. The congregation will be aware of their pastor’s shortcomings and will be able to help him through them in a way that no outsider could.

If the pastor is not open to receive this ministry from his congregation, they will also tend to be closed to his ministry to them. A pastor who is open with his congregation and who is ready to expose his weaknesses and receive care, will encourage the same attitude among his congregation. As in all things, the pastor serves as a model. If he is self-sufficient and seemingly beyond the need for normal fellowship and encouragement, then that is the goal towards which his congregation will strive. They will try to become as self-sufficient and closed as their pastor.

It is worth noting the words Paul uses with his junior pastor, Timothy. “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your *progress*.” The pastor is not required to have ‘arrived’. Like all Christians, he is on a journey, and like all Christians, he is required to make progress. The pastor who gives the impression that he has ‘arrived’ is a discouragement for Christian growth. He might think that he is providing a godly model, but he is actually providing a very unhelpful model, one that is open to the charge of hypocrisy. He must model godly *progress*. He must listen to the Word of God, take it to heart and change his life. This is the model for the congregation to follow.

---

## Obstacles

We have already hinted that the pastor himself can prevent his own spiritual nurture. Too many pastors lock themselves away, spiritually speaking, by being unable or unwilling to receive the ministry of others. Many pastors are used to switching into ‘ministry mode’ whenever they are with mem-

### The Pastor



bers of their congregation. They feel so responsible for everyone else that they lose the ability to talk to their people as equals and receive help from them.

Those who carry the Word of God to others can easily fall into the trap of always teaching it, but never listening to it. It is not even enough for the pastor to apply the Word privately as he prepares his sermon. He must be ready to do so publicly as he interacts with members of the congregation, and to listen to God's word no matter who is speaking it—for "from the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise" (Ps. 8:2).

Many pastors find it almost impossible to receive the ministry of others because of their own insecurity. They may be unsure about their role or their ability to carry it out, and they become defensive. The pastor may feel that if he reveals too much of himself, he may be seen as a weak leader, and lose control. As a result, he holds it all in and discourages others from taking the initiative. The pastor caught in this trap will rarely be aware of the spiritual corner into which he has painted himself.

Pastors are encouraged along this path by the whinging and criticism that they so often bear. Everybody knows how to run the church, and the constant griping tends to drive the pastor back into his shell. He protects himself by refraining from any kind of interaction at this level.

Another problem for the pastor is the sheer number of people who might minister to him. He is known by all, and his foibles and shortcomings are seen by all, and members usually feel they have the right to comment on them—mostly to each other, but sometimes to the pastor himself.

Finally, the pastor can also fall victim to the tyrannous expectations of church life. Many of these expectations are all the more impossible because they are unstated. There are many expectations that a pastor may feel he should live up to—expectations dictated by society, or his denominational tradition, or his predecessor at the church. There may be expectations about how much work he does each week, or how he runs his family, or the clothes he wears, or the car/s he drives, or the hobbies he pursues.

Once a pastor accepts the mantle of these expectations, and fails to meet them (as he inevitably will) he begins to hide. His guilt becomes a barrier between him and his congregation. He will not open up to them and allow them to minister to him, for fear that they will see his 'double life'.

**The** Congregations, for their part, are frequently reluctant to  
**Congregation** approach the pastor to help him in his walk with God. To a

certain extent, this reluctance is born out of an appropriate reverence for those who have been placed over us in the Lord.

However, it is more usually the result of an inappropriate elevation of the pastor onto some super-spiritual pedestal. Many congregations regard their pastor as a breed apart, rather than as a fellow heir of the kingdom, who is as much in need of care and spiritual nurture as all of us.

A further problem is that many congregations have swallowed an hierarchical, institutional view of ministry, and so leave the care of the pastor to the bishops and moderators of the denomination. It is sad that we Evangelicals, who like to affirm the priesthood of all believers and the importance of ‘every-member-ministry’, have sold our birthright on this issue. We need to return to our roots.

But perhaps the chief reason for congregations failing to pastor their pastors is that they don’t know how. Even if the congregation is willing and the pastor is open, it is still hard to work out how to do it effectively. Here are some clues.

---

## Some clues

1 Not everyone must do the same thing all at once. If a pastor has a particular fault, the last thing he needs is for the whole congregation, one by one, to take him aside and tell him in earnest tones about his need to repent. The congregation needs to be sensitive, and to ensure that someone is ministering to the pastor on this point, without him being overwhelmed. Those who exercise leadership within the congregation—the elders, deacons, churchwardens, or whatever—must surely be the ones to see that this happens.

2 We shouldn’t define ministry too narrowly. While pastors do need to receive personal encouragement about their spiritual lives, there are other kinds of ministry that can be just as helpful. The warm greeting, the short letter, prayerful support, the gift of food, baby-sitting, a phone call on his birthday—there are many things that a congregation can do to encourage and help their pastor in his task. Unfortunately, these small, casual encouragements can go unnoticed, both by the pastor when he feels that no-one cares for him, and by the congregation when they feel guilty at their lack of care.

Pastoring the pastor does not necessarily mean having deep and meaningful conversations with him. There is a time for this, just as there is in relationships among congregation mem-



bers, but it is not the norm. Informally sharing a passage of Scripture that we have found helpful, or asking questions about some aspect of the sermon, or sharing a book with him that we have found beneficial—there are endless ways we can pastor the pastor.

- 3** We do not always have to be negative. There is a time for discussing problems and sins, and for rebuking and correcting. But there is also a time for encouragement, and congratulation, and positive feedback. Pastors find tremendous encouragement in seeing their people grow in understanding and holiness. To share with him ways in which this is happening is a great ministry to him—it spurs him on in the arduous work of the gospel.

When he does something helpful or encouraging, we should not hold back in telling him so. The polite “Good sermon this morning” does *some* good, but is fairly conventional and almost mandatory. To mention a particular point of the sermon and how you found it helpful will do any preacher’s heart good.

- 4** We must minister in relationship over time. Serving and caring for our pastors takes time. It is important that we develop a relationship with our pastor that God can use for mutual encouragement over time. It will not be possible for every member to have this relationship, especially in a large congregation, but the members of the church committee, at the very least, should have some ongoing relationship with the pastor. As we develop this relationship, we will have the opportunity of speaking the quiet word of encouragement and rebuke.

- 5** We need to listen as well as speak. Pastors need someone to listen to the troubles that inevitably accompany gospel ministry. The person who can listen and understand the pastor’s struggles will be the one who can offer a genuine and timely word of encouragement in the future. This person will also, no doubt, be the one to whom the pastor turns in times of personal trouble. He or she will also be the one who can enquire about the pastor’s personal life. Pastors cannot cope with every member of the congregation asking him about his quiet times. It soon becomes a tedious, not to say legalistic, charade. However, most pastors are never asked about their quiet times.

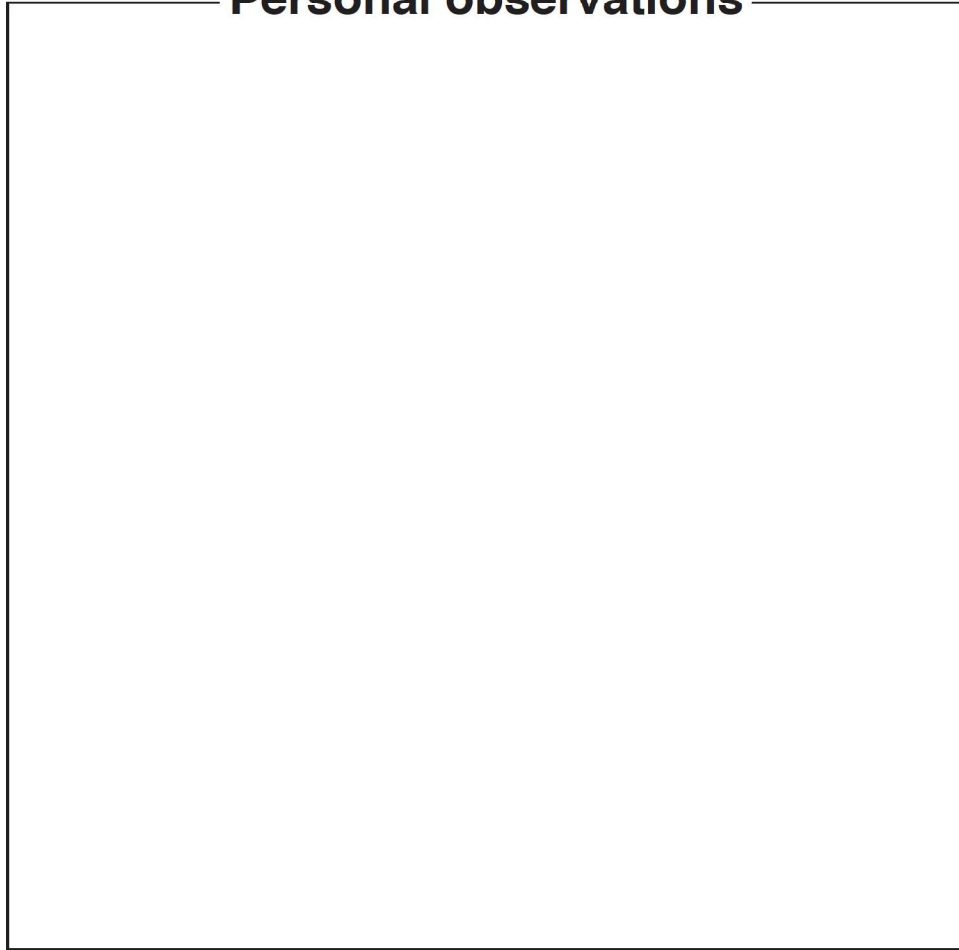
If the pastor can develop this kind of empathetic relationship with one or two or five or ten members of his congregation, there will be ample opportunity, over time, for the pastor to be pastored.

## **An urgent need**

For too many pastors, the work of the gospel is a lonely and frustrating battle. They feel isolated and unloved, and become resentful of their congregation, who are quick to return the favour by grumbling and counting the years until he retires.

Spending time pastoring the pastor is a valuable investment. The congregation, and particularly the congregation's leaders, must take responsibility for the spiritual health and vitality of their own pastor. We must not leave it to other pastors or to distant denominational officials, but prayerfully shoulder the responsibility ourselves.

## **Personal observations**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for personal observations. The box is positioned below the section header and occupies most of the lower half of the page.