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# Pastor as Shepherd

— *Jared C. Wilson* —

I was almost forty years old before I knew what to “go out leaping like calves from the stall” meant (Mal. 4:2). This was because I was almost forty years old when I moved to pastor a small church in rural Vermont, where we lived across the street from a hilly cow pasture. We placed my writing table in the living room right under a big picture window that overlooked their grassy domain, and it was while looking out that window daydreaming that I actually saw calves leaping. I knew what that verse in Malachi meant before that moment, but at that moment I *really* knew.

I wonder if it would help many pastors today to spend some time with literal sheep. I know that ministry as shepherding is metaphorical, but our Lord chose that vocation for a reason. It’s not an incidental metaphor. There must be some corollaries between a minister tending to his flock and a literal shepherd tending to his.

The title of my assigned “portrait” in this cooperative effort is rather interesting: “Pastor as Shepherd.” The word *pastor* literally

means “shepherd.” So really, I am writing about the shepherd as shepherd! Or the pastor as pastor. On the surface, this may seem like an odd or rather obvious approach to describing the profile of a pastor. It is a bit like if you attended a parenting conference and encountered talks on fathers as fathers or mothers as mothers. It would almost not make sense.

But as you well know, today the evangelical church needs a reappréhension of the vocation of the pastor. What else can pastors be but pastors? As I learned in my initial training twenty-plus years ago, pastors can be teachers, coaches, “visionaries,” and “catalytic agents of change.” They can be leaders—even “thought leaders” (whatever that means). Pastors can be strategists, movement makers, marketers, innovators, and chief creative architects. But it seems almost accidental within the evangelical machinery to find a pastor who is actually *a pastor*. We have modernized ourselves beyond the resonance of the biblical image of a shepherd. The dominant vision of the vocation today has more to do with philosophies of leadership—which I’ve been told are thoroughly biblical, though I cannot find much written on the subject prior to the 1980s—and less to do with philosophies of livestock.

However, we ought to take God’s chosen imagery for ministry seriously, and we encounter it in a striking way when Jesus restores Peter to ministry. There Jesus makes unequivocal the leader’s commitment to care for the sheep. Specifically, there are three aspects of Peter’s restoration that teach us about pastoring. I almost chose to clarify that these points refer to what *good* pastors do. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized, *No. These do not describe “good pastors”—they describe pastors, period.*

Brother pastor, if the following three statements are not true

of you, it is not simply that you are not a good pastor; it means you are not pastoring. Here is an outline of the pastoral mandate:

1. Shepherds feed the sheep.
2. Shepherds love the Lamb.
3. Shepherds trust the Good Shepherd.

Our tendency to delineate between pastors and good pastors results, at least in part, from confusing *position* with *vocation*. We hand out the title “pastor” as if it may be divorced from the biblical expectations of shepherding. But my conviction, not born out of this passage alone but out of the greater biblical instruction on the pastoral office, is that these descriptions are the irreducible minimum of the pastoral vocation. In other words, your title may be pastor, your business card may say pastor, and your social media bio may say pastor, but if these three descriptions are not true of you, you are not a pastor. If you do not feed the sheep, love the Lamb, and trust the Good Shepherd, you are not a shepherd.

Let’s now look at the passage at hand. Jesus has been betrayed, tortured, crucified, and resurrected. Hours before His ascension, He has this moment with one of his chief traitors. It is a moment as tender as it is powerful:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to

him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21:15–19)

This, then, serves as the great pastoral commission, and it centers not on building a large ministry or casting a large vision. The central pastoral commission centers on our point number one: shepherds feed the sheep.

## Shepherds Feed the Sheep

At the center of Peter’s restoration is embedded not just a reality of identity but a reality of vocation. What I mean is, Jesus is not just reaffirming Peter’s right standing with Himself; He is restoring Peter’s pastoral office. He is giving him something to do, and it is the fundamental, essential, irreducible task of the shepherd: feed Christ’s sheep.

Three times he commands him to care for the flock:

He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” (v. 15)

He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” (v. 16)

Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” (v. 17)

Allow me to speak briefly about one issue I believe central to the more recent debate about the sufficiency and reliability of the Bible in worship gatherings and in evangelism and apologetic conversations with unbelievers. I think if we trace back some of these pragmatic choices to the core philosophy driving them, we find in the attractional church, for instance, a few misunderstandings. The whole enterprise has begun with a wrong idea of what—biblically speaking—the worship gathering *is*, and even what *the church* is.

In some of these churches where it is difficult to find the Scriptures preached clearly and faithfully—as the reliable, authoritative, and transformative Word of God—we find that things have effectively been turned upside down. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul uses the word “outsider” to describe unbelievers who are present in the worship gathering. He is making the case for our worship services to be intelligible, hospitable, and mindful of the unbelievers present, but his very use of the word “outsider” tells us that the Lord’s-Day worship gathering is not meant to be primarily focused on the unbelieving visitor but on the believing saints gathered to exalt their King. In the attractional-church paradigm, this biblical understanding of the worship gathering is turned upside down. Consequently, mission and evangelism are actually inverted, because Christ’s command to the church to “Go and tell” has been replaced by “Come and see.”

Philosophically, many of these churches operate more like parachurches, and the result is that the sheep, the very lambs of God, basically become the outsiders. Thus you will have leading practitioners of these churches saying things like, “Church isn’t for Christians—it’s for outreach,” or, “I never understand when someone claims they need to be fed—I don’t see this in Scripture

anywhere.” This is troubling for a number of reasons, not least of which is that Jesus Himself affirmed the need. He told Peter, “Feed my sheep.”

Interestingly, though, this “Come and see” approach can lead to sizeable growth. Many churches do exceptionally well at getting people into the pasture. However, they eventually discover that they are not doing so well at making sure the flock is nourished. In 2007, Willow Creek Community Church—showing commendable transparency—published the results of their REVEAL survey, an intensive and ruthlessly self-critical evaluation of their own success in growing fully devoted followers of Christ. A 2008 *Christianity Today* article explained the results this way:

The study shows that while Willow has been successfully meeting the spiritual needs of those who describe themselves as “exploring Christianity” or “growing in Christ,” it has been less successful at doing so with those who self-report as being “close to Christ” or “Christ-centered.”<sup>1</sup>

While I respect Willow for their honesty and desire to minister more effectively, I do disagree with their solution, which is, “Our people need to learn to feed themselves through personal spiritual practices.”<sup>2</sup>

Do maturing Christians need to take responsibility for their personal growth? Of course. Do they need to take ownership (as it were) of their spiritual disciplines? Absolutely. You are not saved or sanctified by somebody else’s faith, and Paul even commands Christians to move on to maturity—to go from milk to meat, so to speak (see 1 Peter 2:2; Heb. 6:1; 1 Cor. 3:1–2).

But we have so much more to offer! In John 21, Jesus does not say to Peter, “Teach my sheep to self-feed.” He says, “Feed my sheep.” He says, “Tend my sheep.”

If you are a pastor, honestly assess your preaching. When the saints gather on Sunday, what kind of food are you giving them? Are you loading them up with the bread of Christ? Are you ladling out the living water that quenches thirst forever?

Or are you loading them down with law? One of the many upside-down practices of some preachers today is how they aim messages of practical Christianity at non-Christians, handing out how-to guides on obedience to people whose hearts do not trust in Jesus. The best you can do with such a preaching strategy is create well-behaved unbelievers. Handing out how-to sermons is like commanding bricks without straw.

Feed the sheep the gospel. The gospel is the only power of salvation—for the Jew and the Greek. Pastors, every week your people gather together starving. They are weary and worn-out, and for some it takes all the faith they have just to get through the door.

What is your job when they wander back into your pen on Sunday morning? Is it not to lay out the feast of the unsearchable riches of Christ? Is it not to present the true food of Christ and his matchless grace? They are hungry, brothers! They ask for bread. Do not give them stones! Lay out generously the new wine of

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*Lay out generously the  
new wine of salvation  
and the juicy meat  
of the glory of Jesus  
Christ. Let's send our  
people home fat with  
the gospel!*

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salvation and the juicy meat of the glory of Jesus Christ. Let's send our people home *fat* with the gospel!

How you see your sheep will certainly affect how you feed them. If you see them as immature and unwilling to grow up, you

will be inclined to withhold the food of the gospel from them.

But if you see them as Jesus saw them—as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd—your compassion will move you to nourish them with the Word.

Pastor, do you have compassion for your flock? It is something I find startlingly missing in so much ink spilled on philosophy of ministry. I listen to guys talk about their churches, and it has so much to do with strategy and technique and style and context—all important things—but sometimes

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*We need shepherds  
up to their elbows in  
Christ's little lambs.  
Pastor, if you do not  
get to the end of your  
week without at least  
a little wool on your  
jacket, you might not  
be a shepherd.*

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I want to ask them, "Do you love your flock?"

Not every Christian man with an entrepreneurial spirit and a gift for speaking should be a pastor. I say this kindly—if your drive is not to feed the sheep, please quit. You may have missed your calling. Your gifts could be used more effectively elsewhere, perhaps for starting a business or a nonprofit.

We don't need any more salesmen in the pulpit. We need tenders of the sheep. We need shepherds up to their elbows in Christ's little lambs. Pastor, if you do not get to the end of your

week without at least a little wool on your jacket, you might not be a shepherd.

Jonathan Edwards was fired from the pastorate at Northampton in June 1750. But they asked him to stay on and preach until they could find his replacement. Astonishingly, he agreed. How could he do this? I think we find a glimpse in his official farewell sermon, preached July 1, 1750 (one month after they had fired him):

I am not about to compare myself with the prophet Jeremiah, but in this respect I can say as he did, that “I have spoken the Word of God to you, unto the three and twentieth year, rising early and speaking.” It was three and twenty years, the 15th day of last February, since I have labored in the work of the ministry, in the relation of a pastor to this church and congregation. And though my strength has been weakness, having always labored under great infirmity of body, besides my insufficiency for so great a charge in other respects, yet I have not spared my feeble strength, but have exerted it for the good of your souls. I can appeal to you as the apostle does to his hearers, Gal. 4:13, “Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh, I preached the Gospel unto you.” I have spent the prime of my life and strength, in labors for your eternal welfare. . . .

I have tried all ways that I could think of tending to awaken your consciences, and make you sensible of the necessity of your improving your time, and being speedy in flying from the wrath to come, and thorough in the use of means for your escape and safety. I have diligently endeavored to find out and use the most powerful motives to persuade you to take care for your own welfare and salvation. I have not only endeavored to

awaken you, that you might be moved with fear, but I have used my utmost endeavors to win you: I have sought out acceptable words, that if possible I might prevail upon you to forsake sin, and turn to God, and accept of Christ as your Savior and Lord. I have spent my strength very much in these things.<sup>3</sup>

Why would he accept their audacious request to keep preaching after they had fired him? Because he loved Christ's sheep and knew the sheep needed to be fed.

Shepherds love the sheep and feed the sheep.

They also love Jesus.

## Shepherds Love the Lamb

Notice the connection Jesus makes in this dialogue. The love for the sheep is implicit, but feeding the sheep is explicitly connected to love for Jesus:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (v. 15)

He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (v. 16)

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" (v. 17)

Some will point out the different Greek words here for love. Jesus is literally asking, "Do you *agape* me?" and Peter responds, "Yes, Lord, you know I *phileo* you." The inference is that Christ

is asking about sacrificial love, and Peter is offering a “less-than” kind of love, more of a brotherly love. However, this alternation is insignificant. D. A. Carson, for instance, suggests that this is more a feature of John’s style—that he is using the words interchangeably, synonymously, which was fairly common even in other literature of the time.<sup>4</sup> And in any event, would it make sense for Peter, so tender in his repentance and desperate for Christ’s approval, to offer him, even if insincerely, a *less-than* kind of love in this moment?

No, the exchange is well-translated simply in both cases as “love”:

“Peter do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord, I love you.”

The emphasis is not on the kind of love, but on the object of love. You won’t feed the sheep unless you love the sheep, but you won’t love the sheep truly until you love the Shepherd. Matthew 25 says:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give

you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:31–40)

A neglect to love and tend to the sheep is a neglect to love and tend to the glory of Christ. Brothers, if you do not love Jesus, you are not pastoring.

What I notice a lot every day in the Christian spheres of social media is just how incredibly adept we evangelicals are at doctrinal criticism, cultural rebuke, theological analysis, biblical exegesis, apologetic and ethical debates, pithy spiritual *bon mots*, religious advice, and of course the use of quotations from Christian leaders present and past. But what seems less prevalent is love for Jesus.

When we see a Bible verse, we run its meaning through our minds and can expound on it with intelligence, but when we see Christ before us, we scarcely stagger at His beauty and exult in Him with awe.

When we see a lost person acting like a lost person in the news, our righteous indignation runs right through our fingertips to our keyboards, but when we see Christ before us, our righteousness ought to crumble, and we ought to run right to His feet in a posture of supplication and ask ourselves, “Do I love Jesus?”

When we see one of our Christian heroes saying something smart or funny or challenging, we send them a virtual high five and echo the proclamation in shouts of appreciation, but when we see Christ before us, do we lift Him high in our hearts and herald His glory with shouts of acclamation? Do we love Jesus?

I hear ministers and ministers-in-training talking about theol-

ogy and technology all the livelong day, but it is frighteningly rare to walk away thinking, “Man, that guy loves Jesus.” Even more frightening, I am increasingly burdened that people do not walk away from conversations with me having that same impression. I have committed the greatest of failures if I can turn a good phrase, preach a good sermon, explain good theology, give out good advice, and even articulate the good news, but people cannot genuinely say about me, “More than anything, it is clear that Jared loves Jesus.”

Brothers, do you love the Lamb?

It will help you to remember this: your love for *Him* will never match His love for *you*. Your love, even if you mustered it all up in a moment of desperate self-abandonment, still could not match the love of His self-emptying, sacrificial blood offering for your sin to redeem you from death and hell.

This brings us, then, to our third and final point. When your care for the sheep is paltry and your love for the Lamb is spotty, at the very least we must know this: shepherds trust the Lord.

## Shepherds Trust the Good Shepherd

While studying John 21 to write this chapter, I became convicted about something I had never realized. It’s a familiar text, to be sure, but it occurred to me that John 21 should teach us to remove the word *never* from our vocabulary when we discuss the restoration of fallen pastors. After all, there is no greater moral failing than publicly denying Jesus Christ, especially in His hour of suffering.

Notice in the passage that Jesus is not just restoring Peter to relationship with Himself. He is not simply saying, “Peter, I believe you; I affirm your faith.” He is restoring Peter to ministry: “Feed my sheep.”

Why? Because while pastors must be biblically qualified, and while pastors must meet the high standards set forth for their office in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5, the foundation of pastoral ministry is not based on your righteousness but on the righteousness of Christ.

John Calvin says, “Nothing was given to Peter through these words that is not also given to all the ministers of the Gospel.”<sup>5</sup> I would add that there is nothing lacking in Peter in this moment that is not lacking in all ministers of the gospel.

It does not matter who you are, pastor. You may have the largest church in your city. You may have book deals. You may be on television and the radio. You may have a top-rated podcast. You may be the envy of every other pastor in your state. But compared to the Good Shepherd, and without the Good Shepherd, you are nothing.

To get the gravity of what is happening here, just think about all of the backstory embedded in this culminating exchange. Peter has followed Christ closely. He has been part of the inner circle within the inner circle. He has had his bright, shining moments. He has shown his inmost insecurity and outmost ignorance to the Lord. He has even, despite being warned about it, betrayed his Savior when put on the spot. So he comes to this moment (I imagine) with fear and trembling, full of angst and awkwardness, burdened under the weight of his sin.

We see it in verse 17: “He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ *Peter was grieved* because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’”

“Oh, please believe I love you!” Peter is saying, but really he is pleading, “Oh, please tell me you love me!” And this is the point of Jesus asking three times. It corresponds, of course, to Peter’s three-time denial. As far as your sin may go, the grace of Christ

goes further still. In this restoration, Jesus is saying to Peter, “You cannot out-sin my love for you.”

Brother pastor, Jesus loves you. And it is this ludicrous grace that serves as your only sure foundation for pastoral ministry. I mean, just look at the context we find on either side of our focus text.

In John 21:5–6, we read, “Jesus said to them, ‘Children, do you have any fish?’ They answered him, ‘No.’ He said to them, ‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’” *What?* That’s a weird methodology. Is the water not connected underneath? It is not a different lake. But the logic did not matter. Why not? Verse 7 gives the reason: “It is the Lord!” Jesus had the power, and He was proving it to them in order to gain their trust.

Look at the other side of our focus passage: John 21:20–23. We read,

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?”

Peter was concerned about the calling of another disciple. To this Jesus replied, “What’s it to you? You follow me!” The same is true for us today.

“What about the pastor across the street?” we may ask.

“Let me worry about him. You follow me!” Jesus answers.



We play reputation games and compare ourselves to one another, but Jesus commands us to have our eyes on Him. We measure others to see how we stack up. We see the greener grass of another shepherd's pasture. We envy another pastor's numbers, his gifted team, his talented worship leader, his nicer facilities, his more successful ministry. Or, alternatively, we wonder when Jesus is going to get out there and "fix" all the other ministries that *aren't* as good as ours.

All the while, Jesus is bidding us to cast our gaze on Him: "What is all that to you?" He says. "You follow me."

In ministry, if you put your trust in anything but the Savior, you will always be disappointed anyway. I remember sitting in a counseling session with a couple on the verge of divorce. I had come with some of my fellow pastors—a last-ditch effort to plead for their reconciliation to each other. I instead found accusations, indictments of my own lack of care for them. The wife, hurt and bitter, said, "I needed my pastor."

The words just hung there. Nobody defended me. I could think of several things to say in my own defense—I *had* been there—but I swallowed them.

If you have been in ministry for any length of time, you have probably endured similar charges. Despite your best efforts, your imperfection is construed as neglect. People are looking for the Good Shepherd. As undershepherds, we fall short. And the sheep notice. They come in for silver bullets, and all we have is the cross.

Skills, gifts, wisdom, experience, strategies, intellect—all these things can adorn pastoral ministry, but the foundation of pastoral ministry must be faith in Christ Jesus alone. *His* goodness, *His* wisdom, *His* power.

*But what if I am not successful? What if I don't even have the gifts and the growing ministry that might tempt me into idolatry?* I think our passage speaks to that:

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21:18–19)

Jesus promised Peter that the ministry would be costly and that it would take him where he wouldn't want to go. Should we expect anything less for ourselves?

Yet note that even the death of Peter was precious to Jesus (“This he said to show by what kind of death he was *to glorify God*”). God cares about our ministries.

If you have children, do you remember when they were little and would bring you some token of their immature affection? I think of my daughters, who would come in from playing in the yard clutching a little bit of greenery in their chubby fists. They might pull up a dandelion or a clump of grass. It could be a weed. But they bring it in as a flower, presenting it gleefully as a present to their mother or me.

What do you do with such a gift? Why, you treat it like it is the most precious rose to be found, do you not? You take that grass or weed, put it in a vase, fill it with water, and set it up on the counter. In the same way, the Father accepts and adorns your ministry as sons through Christ.

So even if the call of the pastor is to die, we trust the Good Shepherd. And we follow the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep.

You have no other foundation, nothing else in which to put your trust. It doesn't even matter how gospel-centered your ministry philosophy is—if your heart is not gospel-centered, you have *nothing*. Your ministry, your platform, your very body itself winds down, wears out, fades away, and dissolves. Only God's glory will remain.

So where will you put your trust? Trust the Shepherd, brother. You have no other foundation. Let us declare, with all our weary confidence, our trust in the Savior, using the words of the old hymn:

My hope is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.  
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,  
But wholly trust in Jesus' name.  
On Christ the solid rock I stand,  
All other ground is sinking sand.  
All other ground is sinking sand.<sup>6</sup>