

SHAPING VIRTUES AMONG THE SHEPHERDS

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*By this all people will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another. (John 13:35)*

Since pastors have written this journal focused on SGC's "Shaping Virtues," one might expect wise and wide-ranging instruction and application of these gospel-shaped virtues to our churches and the people we serve. However, it's possible for us as pastors to do all that while failing to make sufficient application to ourselves. Perhaps even more subtly, to fail to make sufficient application to our pastoral teams.

Sinful Tendencies

Perhaps you can identify with one, some or all of the following statements. I've been impatient when fellow pastors wanted to extend a pastoral discussion. I've been proud when fellow pastors pointed out ways I could grow. I've been jealous when other pastors received attention that I wanted. I've been lazy when other pastors needed my diligence. I've allowed self-righteous thoughts to linger toward other pastors' sins. I've lacked compassion toward other pastors' weaknesses. I've judged other pastors' motives.

These sins aren't constant and thankfully, so far, have not been excessive or disqualifying. They are present, however. Perhaps, on many occasions, my fellow pastors were not aware of these sinful urges in my heart. But the Lord saw. The Lord knew. What a miracle the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And what a mercy to pastor alongside merciful pastors as well.

These sinful tendencies should concern us because we know that the effect of sin, all sin, is the dishonoring of the Lord. When left unchecked, the sins of pastors dishonor the Lord, directly resulting in the church being tempted and its health and effectiveness undermined. A pastoral team that preaches the gospel but fails to allow it to shape its relationships is daring sin to undermine all of its other pastoral labors for the church. This happens when sin festers in the soul of a pastoral team and poisons the gospel-shaped character that ought to be modeled before the church.

The final explosion of this neglect often takes place in nasty church splits, divided pastoral teams, or at least undesired departures. Less severe consequences include the ineffectiveness of the team in leading the church. Pastors cannot be very effective in watching over the flock if they're angry at each other!

Pastors Need Gospel Application

Sometimes pastors are so focused on caring for the rest of the flock and the welfare of the church that we neglect to apply the gospel to our interactions with the pastoral team. We mean well in our efforts to serve. However, neglecting gospel relationships and conduct on our pastoral teams is misguided and dangerous. Caring for the church and caring for the team are not opposing goals; they are necessary friends. It serves the church for the pastoral team to cultivate gospel character toward each other.

Other times, we deny the need for godly virtue altogether, settling for an attempt at mere external politeness among the pastoral team. We are not called to niceness, but to love. And love, the summary and highpoint of all gospel virtues, only comes as we bring our imperfect selves to the gospel we teach to others.

Pastors need gospel application in those unsanctified parts of our heart as we interact with our fellow pastors. We need “church office” gospel application, “elder meeting” gospel application, “Sunday review” gospel application, “job review” gospel application, “role transition” gospel application, “budget planning” gospel application, and “decision disagreement” gospel application. We need the Shaping Virtues of the gospel among the shepherds.

Philippians 1:27 ought to inform our pastoral relationships. “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...” In other words, make sure gospel virtues are abounding among the shepherds.

A Few Scenarios

Here are a few practical scenarios that come to mind, where these seven Shaping Virtues ought to be applied.

Humility

A fellow pastor shares an observation about your recent message or ministry event. Our pride rushes to our defense, demanding that we be honored. But humility remembers that our reputation is found in Christ. We want to receive the input of our fellow pastors so that we can show progress in our ministry and serve the flock well.

Joy

The pastoral team is discouraged because of a recent membership departure. The burdens of ministry weigh heavy on our hearts. However, each team member can model joy for their brothers as they recount and remember God’s grace and faithfulness. Joy is a gospel virtue that we can give on a regular basis to our fellow pastors in the long and tiring journey of pastoring.

Gratitude

A fellow pastor has been behind in his assignments recently and has caused some burdens for his fellow pastors. The natural response is self-righteousness and grumbling. If not out loud, we at least do this in our

heart (and perhaps when we get home). But the gratitude that flows from our own experience of God's mercy causes us to consider the many ways that God has been kind to us through this brother. Recounting those gifts will cause our gratefulness for him to overwhelm our temptation to complain.

Encouragement

A pastor is sharing some struggles in his marriage and parenting. A misguided and too-busy fellow pastor might make the assumption that pastors don't need spiritual encouragement. But the gospel transforms our mouths into fountains of living water that are meant to refresh our fellow brothers. The church only grows as we speak the truth of God's life-giving Word to each other. This is true for pastors, too. Gospel-drenched encouragement must be prioritized among the shepherds.

Generosity

A pastor on the team has just had a baby or an illness in the family or is moving to a new home. Mere colleagues may offer congratulations or sympathy, but generous pastors will look for ways to give of themselves to help their fellow pastors. Generosity may also come into play in the very practical consideration of pastoral compensation or the annual budget discussion. Generous pastors are not looking to protect their own position or their ministry budgets at the expense of their fellow pastors but to be generous personally and in ministry in how they relate to their brothers.

Servanthood

An unpleasant pastoral need has come to the attention of the whole team. Perhaps it is a difficult counseling conversation, a tedious administrative task, or a thankless job that simply has to be done. A selfish pastor looks to avoid difficult pastoral assignments. A servant-hearted team views those moments as opportunities to love one another. As the Lord washed the feet of his disciples, so we ought to wash one another's feet.

Godliness

The needs of the church multiply and sometimes pastors neglect the growth of their own soul. But a team devoted to sanctification will take time to spur each other on toward godliness. A godly team keeps watch over the souls of their fellow pastors: their devotional life, their marriage, their parenting, their growth in grace. These areas are not sacrificed to serve the development of the church. How easy for pastoral teams to assume godliness and accent ministry. Let it not be so among us. Let us emphasize godliness and trust the Lord for the growth of our ministry.

A Final Appeal

In all of these scenarios, and countless others, my appeal is that we allow the gospel-informed Shaping Virtues to shape our character toward our fellow pastors. We must keep watch over our own souls, including the soul of our pastoral team, lest we malign the gospel ministry with character unworthy of the gospel. Let our teams of shepherds be shaped by the gospel of the Chief Shepherd.