

WHAT IS A PASTOR FOR?

Walt Alexander

Senior Pastor, Trinity Grace Church (Athens, TN)

Like every other Sunday morning, he stood up to pray.⁵⁹ It was 11:20 a.m. in London on June 18, 1944. The British empire that had controlled nearly a quarter of the world's land was essentially over. And the capital of the British Empire was under attack.

Sirens blared. Chaos reigned in the streets. People ran about in terror because of the routine air assaults from German planes, but also because of the remote-controlled bombing that had begun by the Nazis only days before.

Nevertheless, it was Sunday morning and Martyn Lloyd-Jones had a congregation to lead.

Even though at this point in the service everyone in the church began to hear a bomber plane closing in overhead, Lloyd-Jones began his “long prayer”—his pastoral prayer—and did not stop. He continued to pray until the noise overhead was so loud he could not even hear himself.

The congregation braced for the explosion.

The bomb fell. The chapel structure cracked. Bits of the ceiling and dust fell from the roof. The congregation rose to their feet, assuming the service was over.

But, after a brief pause, Lloyd-Jones continued his prayer as though nothing happened! The congregation sat down again.

After he concluded his prayer, Lloyd-Jones advised anyone who was nervous to move into the seats under one of the galleries. Then, he climbed the steps to the sacred desk and began to preach from the book of Jude.

⁵⁹ This illustration was borrowed from Kevin Vanhoozer & Owen Strachan, *The Pastor As Public Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 37-38.

Though the world was at war and though the war was literally at the door of the church, Martyn Lloyd-Jones believed it was no time for him to abandon the office and calling of a pastor to build up the people of God for the glory of God.

We long for the pastors of Sovereign Grace to continue to have a similar resolve and devotion to the office and calling of a pastor. May no world events deter us, no cultural movements distract us, no personal ambition divert us from devoting ourselves to the office and calling of pastoral ministry: *to build up the people of God for the glory of God!*

Acts 20 lays out at least four imperatives for pastors from Paul's final sermon to the Ephesian elders. Though several of these imperatives are embodied in the example of the Apostle Paul detailed in this sermon, each imperative is commanded of all pastors in the New Testament.

Serve the Lord

The very first thing Paul underlines for the Ephesian elders is his example of serving the Lord. He reminds them of how he lived among them the "whole time," "serving the Lord" with all humility, tears, and trials (20:18, 19).

Later, in one of the most well-worn verses about pastoral ministry, he proclaims that the main ambition of his life is to "finish ... the ministry," literally, his service (20:24).

Often, we think of serving in such a way that the emphasis is upon how we are serving—whether preaching, counseling, leading corporate worship, or whatever else. But for Paul, the emphasis is not upon how he is serving but who he is serving: the Lord Jesus Christ!

More than that, Paul says his life reduces down to his calling to serve the Lord. Nowhere does Paul describe what this reality means to him more powerfully than Acts 20:24, saying, "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus."

The siren calls to serve other things will never cease for the Lord's servants. It may be prominent members pressuring us to advance their initiatives, social media encouraging us to articulate our commentary, or life coaches urging us to build our platform. But churches don't exist to serve pastors. Pastors exist to serve churches and give their lives away to serve the Lord.

We serve the Lord.

Do Not Shrink From Suffering

In underlining his example, Paul reminds them of how he did not shrink from suffering. He points out how he served the Lord “with tears and with trials through the plots of the Jews” (20:19).

Rarely did he finish a speech in the book of Acts. Often, he was stopped mid-sentence to be arrested, beaten, or run out of town. As he begins making his way to Jerusalem, he knows more suffering is coming: “*the Holy Spirit testifies to me that imprisonment and afflictions await me*” (20:23). But he does not shrink from preaching the whole counsel of God and suffering for it.

Pastoral ministry is not the hardest job in the world, but it does bring with it a degree of suffering from which pastors must not shrink. Is it persecution and imprisonment? In some countries, it is right now. Is it execution? In some countries, it is right now.

But, in every church in every generation, the suffering that pastors must not shrink from is the daily anxiety of watching while everyone else is sleeping. John Flavel once said, “[Pastors] are fittingly compared to the toil of men in harvest, to the labors of a woman in travail, and to the agonies of soldiers in the extremity of a battle. We must watch when others sleep.”⁶⁰

I’ll never forget a conversation with my former pastor, Bill Kittrell, after I returned giddy-and-green from the Sovereign Grace Pastors College in 2009. Someone asked him, “What motivates you to read your Bible in the morning?” Bill responded, “I am terrified.”

He was no doubt anxious about many things concerning his soul and family, but I never saw one specific anxiety disappear in ten years working alongside him—the anxiety of watching the sheep while others were sleeping.

Proclaim the Gospel

After reminding the Ephesian elders of how he served the Lord, Paul reminds them again and again of how he proclaimed the gospel and the Word of God to them. Seven times in Acts 20 he reminds them of how he proclaimed the gospel: *declaring* (v. 20), *teaching* (20), *testifying* (21), *testify* (24), *proclaiming* (25), *testify* (26), *declaring* (26).

The point is clear. Pastors are not called to be creative or innovative. Pastors are not called to be hip and original. Pastors are called to proclaim what they have heard, what they have received.

⁶⁰ John Flavel, “The Character of a True Evangelical Pastor, Drawn by Christ” *The Works of John Flavel*, vol 6. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 569.

Behind the word *proclaim* is the idea of a herald. Before radio waves, newspapers, and social media, news was shared by a herald: someone sent to announce what had happened. So too, pastors are called to herald and proclaim the good news of the gospel.

A herald isn't anxious about his hair, image, or following. He's anxious about the message of the gospel getting out. The news we herald is news that demands a response.

Behind the word *testify* is the courtroom (20:21, 26). Everyone who hears the good news of the gospel is on trial. How they respond to the gospel is a matter of life or death, heaven or hell, mercy or judgment.

Pastors are called to witness and testify to what they have seen and heard about Jesus before it's too late. Pastors are called to defend Christ, commend Christ, lay out the evidence about Christ, and urge all who hear to turn in repentance and faith to Christ.

One of the most stirring paintings of the Reformation is that of Martin Luther by Lucas Cranach. In the painting, Luther is standing in the pulpit, holding the Word of God with one hand and pointing to the cross of Christ portrayed before his hearers with the other hand.

Preaching is not merely telling the old, old story. Preaching brings about an encounter with God and the free offer of salvation in the gospel. This free offer demands our real-time response, a response to which we will be held eternally accountable.

Care for the Church

In verse 28, Paul commands the Ephesian elders to care for the church. There are many important things contained in this verse, but foremost for pastors is the metaphor of the shepherd that ties it together with the reference to "the flock" and the call "to care" or shepherd.

The shepherd is a vital biblical metaphor. Again and again, when the Bible uses this metaphor, it emphasizes the Lord is our shepherd. He leads us. He guides us. He feeds us. He protects us. We are his sheep and the sheep of his pasture.

And it's no different in this verse. It is the *church of God*—the church is not my church or your church. *Which Jesus obtained with his own blood*—it belongs to God and has been bought by Christ. *Over whom the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*—we serve those he entrusts to us.

While this verse strongly affirms God's role in purchasing and gathering his people, it nevertheless also strongly affirms the privilege and responsibility of men to shepherd and care for specific people in specific local churches. Pay careful attention to the ones over whom "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." Care for them.

We are all sheep, pastors included. Sheep are not the fluffy, cuddly creatures we often imagine. They are unintelligent, stubborn, and often need to be rescued. Yet, shepherds do the dirty work. They lead, guide, and feed. They rescue and protect. They are not fragile animal lovers. They are rough, hard, and weary from many sleepless nights.

That's the work pastors are called to do. To shepherd and care. To pay careful attention. To watch while others sleep.

That's why pastoral ministry is no place for a man who wants to do other things. No place for a man who is easily distracted or easily discontented. It's for men who are ready and willing to stand immovably underneath the Great Shepherd for all their days to care for specific people in specific local churches.

Labor On

When Martyn Lloyd-Jones stood up to pray and preach in the midst of Nazi Germany's bombing of London, he gave a powerful testimony to us. The church labors in the midst of its own war against sin and death, against suffering and disease, against pride, in the midst of a fallen world. May she labor on. And may her pastors labor on, resolved and devoted to the office and calling of a pastor.