

The Shepherd

A pastor is in an awkward position. "Pastor" means "shepherd." The Bible talks about men being called by God to be shepherds of Christ's flock on earth (Ephesians 4:11; Acts 20:28). Jesus told Peter to feed His sheep and lambs (John 21:15-17). Peter later wrote to other Christian preachers, "*be shepherds of the flock of God that is with you and care for it*" (1 Peter 5:2).

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Some mere men are also shepherds, pastors by the will of Christ, to feed and lead Christ's flock. When mere mortal men are called shepherds or pastors, it must be remembered that Jesus is "*the Chief Shepherd*" (1 Peter 5:4).

What is awkward about being a pastor? While a pastor is a shepherd under Christ's authority, he must also admit that he is only a sinful, fallible human being like any other Christian. He may feel "sheepish" about that, for he is also one of the sheep, one of Christ's little lambs.

It is sometimes uncomfortable to be both sheep and shepherd. When dad and mum leave big brother in charge, big brother is still only one of the children. He has no authority to do anything but what his parents told him to do. He is accountable to them and to his brothers and sisters.

Would it not be better if Christ were here in His physical presence? Would it not be better for Jesus Himself to preach, teach, counsel, guide, and instruct? Or would it not be better for God to send angels from heaven to lead and direct churches? It may seem to us that it would be better for Jesus Himself to preach or at least to send an angel to preach. But God knows better and is wiser than we are. God has chosen to have sinful men do the preaching and teaching, the feeding and leading.

There is one way in which it seems better to have a human, not an angelic, preacher. An angel could only say: "*You are sinners, but Christ died for you to forgive your sins.*" A man can say: "*We are sinners. But Christ died for us to forgive our sins.*" Jesus knows best. The chief Shepherd knows - for reasons that we may not know in this life - that it is better for Him to do His work as Shepherd of the Christian church indirectly through the persons of weak, fragile, sinful men. That is His choice. That is His will. But that does not mean that Jesus is not the Shepherd of His flock.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep. He died for our sins in our place. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows and loves the sheep. He makes us His own. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who chooses and calls the sheep. Jesus said, "*My sheep listen to My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me, and I give them eternal life, and they will certainly not be lost, and no one will snatch them out of My hand*" (John 10:27-28).

Jesus is still the Good Shepherd after His ascension into heaven. He has not given up that work. He does His work as Shepherd through His Word. That means that a pastor's work, as a subsidiary shepherd, is simply to present God's Word, Christ's Word, to people.

A pastor must know that Word. So he must study that Word. He must proclaim that Word publicly and privately. He must call to repentance and to faith, and he must unmask wolves in sheep's clothing, that is, false prophets, of whom Christ tells us to beware (Matthew 7:15).

The keynote of a pastor's work must be the same as the keynote of Christ's preaching. That is Law and Gospel. That is summed up in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "*We have all gone astray, like sheep. Each one of us has turned to his own way, and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all*" (Isaiah 53:6).

Through His Word, Jesus preserves His people in the one true faith. Through His Word, Jesus again and again calls us and brings us to repent of our sins, for we remain sinners in this life. Through His Word, Jesus again and again assures us of full and free forgiveness of all our sins because of His death on the cross in our place. Jesus gives that assurance through His Word by itself or with the water in baptism, or with His body and blood in the Lord's Supper.

Through His Word, Jesus keeps His people together in local communions of believers. Through His Word, Jesus calls and brings yet more people to repent of their sins and to believe the good news of forgiveness, life, and salvation for Jesus' sake, and so to be members of His body and of a local communion of believers in Christ. Having finished the work of redemption for which He walked on earth, Jesus still works in human hearts through His Word.