

Professional Responsibilities of a Pastor

How to Distinguish a Shepherd from a Hireling

By Jon Powell

Every profession is incumbent with particular rewards and specific responsibilities. Many focus on the rewards, yet few realize the need for the professional to conscientiously face his professional responsibilities. Failure to meet these responsibilities may ultimately result in demotion, termination or legal action. As an example, doctors face malpractice suits, lawyers are disbarred and corporate officers are fined and end up in prison.

Similarly, in the religious realm, the pastoral position carries significant expectations and duties. Since these professional responsibilities have been largely ignored in our day, the pastoral 'career' has fallen into disrepute. Moral scandals, financial embezzlement, laziness, incompetence and compromise have made the contemporary clergy into objects of disdain and jest. How many movies and TV shows mock the dignity of pastors by portraying him as a mumbling, anachronistic, effeminate geek, or a slick charlatan whose only motives are popularity, money and women? How has the position of being "God's Anointed" fallen from so great a height?

Are there guidelines that we can follow for restoring respect to the office of the clergy? We answer with a resounding 'yes!', realizing that a pastor has responsibilities far beyond marrying and burying. He is to be the foremost in modeling Christ to his family, congregation and world, so as to prevent the name of Christ from being defamed on earth.

Besides restoring the reputation of Christ, every serious disciple of Christ should invest significant thought and prayer into choosing a spiritual leader. Obviously, this decision has far-reaching implications for both good and evil in the life of every disciple.

The purpose of this essay is to provide some distinct Biblical guidelines that will help the believer discern a true spiritual leader from its aberrant imitations, thereby preventing apostasy, disillusionment, discouragement, hurt, and compromise in the life of the believer. We assert that true pastoral competency can be objectively identified and discussed from a Biblical perspective.

For the purposes of this essay we use the term 'pastor' loosely to include the specific Biblical terms "elder", "shepherd", "overseer" and "deacon"—thereby including almost anyone who is raised up into leadership in a church context.

Several passages of full mention will serve as the reference for our discussion:

- John 10:1-21 uses the shepherding analogy, contrasting the heart of a true shepherd to the uncommitted hireling.
- Titus 1:6-9 describes the character and qualifications of an elder.
- 1 Peter 5:1-4 describes the proper motives for an elder.
- 1 Timothy 3:1-7 again describes qualifications for an elder.

The following will therefore serve as definitions for the two basic types of spiritual leaders one will encounter:

Pastor: a called one who uses his God-given authority to tear down and build up according to Biblical directives. His authority emanates from sound character.

Hireling: one, who in the absence of a godly calling uses his position of authority to meet his personal needs and further his interests, thus attempting to establish his own kingdom on earth. His authority emanates from personal appearance, presentation, charisma or natural gifting.

Just as treasury agents spend significant time examining real currency in painstaking detail to be able to detect the counterfeit, we will focus on identifying the genuine article, a Biblical pastor. The counterfeit hireling will then be logically obvious.

The following are some key distinctives of a Biblical pastor:

- Uncompromisingly preaches the truth: as a miner follows a vein of silver wherever it goes, a true pastor will likewise search out and communicate the truth no matter the obstacle or cost. He has a solid grasp of exegetical theology, original languages and culture as well as church history, so he is not fooled by seasonal winds of false doctrine that blow through the church.
- Cares about his people: a true shepherd *knows* his sheep and takes time to care about the burdens, temptations and interests of his flock. He has a genuine compassion for the weak, sick and poor. [Heb. 4: 15, 5: 2]. Since a godly pastor knows his flock, his teaching is relevant and often very poignant to his listeners. A hireling has to substitute shallow politeness, contemporary platitudes and rules in lieu of true concern and accurate counsel.
- Has a Biblical vision of success: eschews worldly success metrics (large congregations, expansive facilities & extensive media coverage), and focuses on prayer, teaching and the spiritual health & growth of those under his care. He understands it's God's responsibility to expand the breadth of his ministry and his responsibility to focus on its depth.
- Is genuine: knows his own weaknesses and strengths, and that his success lies in empowerment from the Master. He does not try to be a spiritual paragon in his own strength, but is appropriately transparent to his flock about his weaknesses & sins. He functions masterfully in the areas of his strengths, yet is not afraid to delegate areas of weakness to other faithful men & women.
- Is humble: can be approached on questionable matters, listens openly to input and has a clear understanding of what He would be in absence of God's redemption and power at work within him. Allows other men & women of gifting to function alongside without being threatened. He knows that Christ heads his church and that Christ should get the glory for any true work done in and through his church.
- Diligent: leads his congregation by visibly honing his gifts and using his time for God's highest priorities. He has an eternal perspective of time that does not allow him to squander it with frivolous pursuits. However, he is not a workaholic and takes time for relaxation and vacation. [2 Tim. 2: 4, Eccl. 3, 7: 18]. An effective pastor also models growth in character, knowledge and effectiveness--his congregation sees him grow right in front of them.
- Uses his authority within Scriptural bounds: is not a control-freak, confining his use of authority to the Biblical boundaries of morals & doctrine. Not an

- effeminate coward, but courageously and compassionately practices church discipline. [Titus 2:15b, Matt 18, 1 Cor. 4:18-21]
- Has Biblical Priorities: knows his gifts, calling and the relative importance of his responsibilities. Keeps God first, then his wife, his family and then his ministry. [Acts 6:1-4, 1 Tim. 3:4-5]. Focuses on prayer, study of the Word and teaching for those for whom he is most responsible. In summary, neither God nor his family gets what is left over after he does public ministry.
 - Invests wisely: looks to utilize his resources (time, abilities, finances, material possessions) to store up treasure in heaven by praying, teaching, admonishing, investing time in those who can profit most from his influence. This guarantees that the church of God will last for more than his generation. [Matt. 6:19-21, 2 Tim. 2:2].
 - Stays culturally relevant: knows the signs of the times and how to relate to modern man without diluting the message of the Gospel. Anachronistic distortions of the Gospel of Christ unnecessarily turn people away.
 - Discerning: sees beyond the outward appearance of people, conflict and events. Correctly ascertains the big picture when dealing with conflict by avoiding fruitless arguments and people who needlessly exhaust his resources, time and patience.
 - Able to handle adversity: courageously engages in the fight of faith. The devil, demons, ungodly people and even church people will hate a godly pastor due to his convictions. Standing for truth engenders social exclusion, diminished opportunities, financial repercussions and even physical threats. A true soldier expects and can function in adverse climates, deprivation and the presence of fierce, persistent enemies. [1 Tim. 6:12, 2 Tim. 2:3-4].
 - Uses words with restraint: the book of Proverbs is replete with admonitions to limit our words. A wise pastor gets to the point, uses logic effectively and keeps things interesting. A hireling is more interested in being the focus of attention and hearing himself speak than considering the needs and attention span of his listeners.

These distinctives are intended to provide a starting point for evaluating the spiritual leaders in our life—not in a spirit of suspicion, but with an eye towards advancing the Kingdom of God. It has been my sad experience that there are very few pastors who have really made a godly imprint upon their world, and unfortunately, I believe that my experience is not unique across the church body.

However, if a pastor will take his professional responsibilities seriously, the rewards and the results of his labor will be very significant. May God give the church truly called pastors, to lead us out of lukewarmness & heresy so common across the religious landscape in our time. As the standard is raised we will then see a restoration of respect to the office of the clergy.

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