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PASTORAL SPIRITUALITY: IDENTITY AND CALLING

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In a rural society like that of time of the patriarchs, and given the preponderance of agricultural tasks in that time period, the job of shepherding was quite common. Many of the Bible characters that we know were shepherds: Abel, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons, Moses and David.

God communicated with his people using language and metaphors that were well known to them. The prophets referred to God as the shepherd of His people.

Jacob, when blessing his son Joseph, says that his hands were strengthened *“because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel”* (Genesis 49:24).

Perhaps that most well-known Psalm of the Bible is Psalm 23, in which David begins my proclaiming: *“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing ...”*

The Psalmist Asaph, when begging for the restoration of Israel in Psalm 80, called out to God as follows:

“Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth ...”

One of the best worship invitations is in Psalm 95. Verses 6 and 7 say:

*“Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.”*

And Psalm 100 repeats something very similar.

One of the most beautiful passages about God’s loving care for his people is Isaiah 40:11:

“He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”

God delegates this pastoral function to the leaders of the people.

The word *pastor* is derived from Latin, and means shepherd. Moses was a true pastor/shepherd of a nation, with more than two million people during 40 years in the desert. As he neared his death, he asked the Lord to *“appoint someone over this community... so the Lord’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd (Numbers 27:16-17).* And God instructed him to establish Joshua as his successor.

Asaph makes a very precious mention of David (Psalm 78:70-72):

He chose David his servant took him from the sheepfolds. From tending ewes God brought him, to shepherd Jacob, his people, Israel, his heritage. He shepherded them with a pure heart; with skilled hands he guided them.

The priests, prophets and elders of Israel were responsible for pastoring God’s people. But when they were unfaithful to the Lord and to their noble function, God became angry with them and spoke very severely.

Jeremiah 2.8: *“The priests said not, Where is Jehovah? and they that handle the law knew me not: the rulers also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit”.*

Jeremiah 10.21: *“For the shepherds are become brutish, and have not inquired of Jehovah: therefore they have not prospered, and all their flocks are scattered.”*

Jeremiah 23.1: *“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD”.*

Jeremiah 50.6: *“My people have become lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray. They have made them turn aside on the mountains; they have gone along from mountain to hill and have forgotten their resting place.*

The harshest passage in the Old Testament against those shepherds is in Ezekiel 34:1-6:

The word of the LORD came to me: Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them: To the shepherds, thus says the Lord God: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been pasturing themselves! Should not shepherds pasture the flock? You consumed milk, wore wool, and slaughtered fatlings, but the flock you did not pasture. You did not strengthen the weak nor heal the sick nor bind up the injured. You did not bring

back the stray or seek the lost but ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and became food for all the wild beasts. They were scattered and wandered over all the mountains and high hills; over the entire surface of the earth my sheep were scattered. No one looked after them or searched for them.

But this same chapter contains a great message of hope. The good news (11-16):

For thus says the Lord God: Look! I myself will search for my sheep and examine them. As a shepherd examines his flock while he himself is among his scattered sheep, so will I examine my sheep. I will deliver them from every place where they were scattered on the day of dark clouds. I will lead them out from among the peoples and gather them from the lands; I will bring them back to their own country and pasture them upon the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and every inhabited place in the land. In good pastures I will pasture them; on the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down on good grazing ground; in rich pastures they will be pastured on the mountains of Israel. I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest—oracle of the Lord God. The lost I will search out, the strays I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, and the sick I will heal; but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd them in judgment.

In this glorious promise, the Lord Jehovah gives the assurance that He himself will come personally to look for His sheep, and He will recognize them, free them, deliver them, gather them, feed them in good and succulent pastures, and give them a sheepfold.

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the beginning of this gospel, Matthew transcribes part of the prophecy of Micah 5:2-4 regarding the birth of the Messiah:

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Matt. 2.6).

But it seems evident that the most revealing passage about the fulfillment of the prophecy in Ezekiel 34 is John chapter 10, with the words of the Jesus himself:

John 10. 11-16:

I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep^[9] that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd.

John 10. 27-30:

My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one.

Hebrews 13:20: He refers to Jesus as “that great Shepherd (in Greek, *mega poimen*) of the sheep”.

In chapter 2:25 of his first Epistle, Peter says to his readers: “For ‘you were like sheep going astray,’ but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

And in chapter 5 of the same epistle, verse 4, while addressing the presbyters of the church, he says: “And when the Chief Shepherd appears...” (in Greek, *arqui-poimen* = the head shepherd).

There is no doubt that the church has only one shepherd: Jesus Christ.

But that one and only shepherd of the universal church, after his resurrection and before returning to the Father, once again sought out Peter who, disappointed in himself for having denied the Lord, had gone back to his prior profession as a fisherman along with six other disciples. Jesus, repeating himself several times, entrusted Peter with the task of shepherding his sheep.

John closed his gospel with this moving and enlightening narration.

John 21.1-17:

After this, Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed himself in this way. Together were Simon Peter, Thomas called

Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We also will come with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." So he said to them, "Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something." So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish. So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad, and jumped into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish. When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you just caught". So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three large fish. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come, have breakfast." And none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they realized it was the Lord. Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish. This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead.

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 then 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 distressed that he had said to him a 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.

The first time, Jesus called Simon and Andrew to be "fishers of men"; this second time, he calls Simon Peter to be a "shepherd of men". The first has to do more with evangelization, and the second has to do with caring for, nurturing and building up the Lord's disciples.

Although the Lord is referring here especially to Peter, the rest of the New Testament shows us that this calling to care for His sheep was not a ministry given exclusively to Peter, but rather to all the apostles and ministers of the church.

In this way, Jesus Christ delegated his pastoral task to the twelve apostles; and then to new apostles and presbyters as well.

THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

The apostles were called to evangelize, pastor, care for, nurture, and build up the church. First in Jerusalem, and later do the same beyond Jerusalem.

As pioneers in the planting and nurturing of churches in different towns and regions, an important part of their apostolic ministry consisted in forming and establishing elders (presbyters) in each town to take care of the Lord's flock in each of their respective cities.

Acts 14:23: "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (presbyters) for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."

In Acts 20:17, Paul met with the elders of the church in Ephesus, and says the following:

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20.28).

Some considerations regarding the pastoral ministry:

The word shepherd, *poimen* in Greek, is used 19 times in the Greek version of the New Testament:

- 4 times in the literal sense, referring to shepherds of sheep (Luke 2)
- 5 times in an allegorical sense
- 6 times in John 10, where Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd
- 3 times in the direct sense referring to Jesus Christ (Hebrews 23:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4)
- It is interesting that the Greek noun for *Shepherd* is only used once to refer to someone other than Jesus Christ.

This only instance is in Ephesians 4:11, where it is accompanied by the word "teachers".

*“And he gave some, apostles;
and some, prophets;
and some, evangelists;
and some, pastors and teachers”.*

Generally, we speak of the five ministries of Ephesians 4, but if we observe carefully, we will see that the text does not say: “...and some pastors; and some, teachers”; but rather “... and some, pastors and teachers.”

For this reason and others that I will point out, to my understanding, there are not five ministries but rather four.

This is confirmed in the parallel passage of 1 Corinthians 12:28: *“And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles...”*

Here Paul omits the word “pastor” and only uses the term that defines the equivalent ministry of “pastor”, which is that of “teacher”.

Pastor is an allegorical term, with *sheep* as the counterpart.

Teacher is the literal term, with *disciples* as the counterpart.

In my understanding, to pastoring and teaching are the same ministry.

Furthermore, when Paul instructs his coworker in 1 Timothy 3 about the requirements that should be met by those who are recognized as bishops and presbyters, one of those requirements is that he be “able to teach”, (in Greek, *didaktikós*), which is the gift needed to be a *didaskalós* (teacher).

Something similar is said in Titus 1:9: *“He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.”*

OUR IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST

Jesus is the church’s only pastor in absolute terms. The sheep are his, by creation and by redemption. He is the only Pastor-Teacher. Jesus was clear with the apostles when he told them not to be like the leaders of their time, who loved the front row and to be

called “Rabbi, Rabbi” by men, *“for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers”* (Matthew 23:6-12).

Our pastoral ministry depends on our identification with Christ. Paul declares: *“I no longer live, but Christ lives in me...”* (Galatians 2:20). Christ wants to continue to pastor each one of his sheep personally, through us. It is not we who pastor, but rather he is in us. It is he in us that loves, comforts, teaches, protects, frees, heals, seeks out, disciples, reprimands, corrects, helps, has compassion, prays, intercedes and battles. Paul said: *“I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me”* (Colossians 1:29).

The basis of the pastoral call consists of denying ourselves, taking up our cross, refusing to live for ourselves, and consecrating our lives out of love and gratitude towards Christ, to serve him by seeking out the lost and pastoring them through the grace of Christ in us.

THE TRUE MOTIVATION

It does not matter what you have gone through. It does not matter if the brothers and sisters that you have pastored or have tried to pastor question you or let you down. It does not matter if you are disappointed in yourself.

Today Jesus is here and again he asks insistently, as to Peter: Do you love me? There is no other question. That is the only question. And he expects an answer from each of us. He almost demands it. We must respond. We need to do so in a climate of cordiality and friendship, of calm and depth, of sincerity and trust.

Peter, what are you going to do with your life? If you love me, care for my sheep. Look after my lambs. Do not go back to your old job. If you love me, commit yourself to pastoral ministry.

THE STYLE OF A HEALTHY PASTORAL MINISTRY

Many years later, Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ, wrote to the pastors of those who had been expatriated to many different regions by the dispersion. 1 Peter 5.1-4:

So I exhort the presbyters among you, as a fellow presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed. Tend the flock of God in your midst, [overseeing] not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

This is a very lovely and illuminating passage regarding the correct pastoral ministry style. Let us observe some important details:

1. *To the presbyters among you, I appeal...* As an apostolic authority over the presbyters, He could have said I demand or I order, but he prefers to use a fraternal, humble and friendly tone. This brings about better results.
2. He does not say: *To the presbyters over you*, but rather **among** you. It is not about hierarchy or a position of superiority. Not *over* but among, as those who are alongside them.
3. *I appeal as a fellow presbyter...* Peter was an apostle, but he also put himself on the same level as the presbyters.
4. The flock belongs to God, not to the shepherds.
5. The pastoral function is to look after, to care for, *not by force* (not compulsively), but with goodwill, with love, with enthusiasm, and voluntarily.
6. Not out of desire for gain, *but eager to serve*, from the heart.
7. Not as owners or masters of the flock. Without authoritarianism. True authority is established through the example of a holy life.
8. We will receive our recompense when we meet with the Chief Shepherd. *“You will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away”*. Hallelujah!

HOW CAN WE KNOW IF WE HAVE THE PASTORAL GIFT OR CALLING?

1. Through the normal development of your service to God.

We have all been called to serve the Lord, to share the gospel, to make disciples, to have spiritual children, to care for them and to build them up in the Lord. But in doing so, if you notice that some higher grace begins to manifest itself in regards to winning others over, in teaching them the Word and in shaping their lives; or you feel a burden for caring for brothers and sisters who are newer in the Lord; or you see that you are growing in the revelation of the Word and in grace to counsel and guide others; or you sense growth in your spiritual stature: if you notice these things, it is likely that you have a ministerial gift as pastor-teacher.

2. By some personal experience in your encounter with God.

Perhaps a specific calling, a word, a revelation, a growing and persistent burden, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit in your heart.

3. Through the confirmation of the body of Christ.

Mainly by the testimony of older brothers in the Lord, the pastors. This can also come from partners in ministry and from the congregation. The confirmation can come from some prophetic word. It is even better if it comes from the mouth of two or three witnesses.

4. Because of need.

The need of others, of the congregation. Sheep need a pastor. Due to special circumstances under God's sovereignty.

5. By possessing both the character requirements and the gift for pastoral ministry.

Paul points them out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.

In general, there is a convergence of almost all of these factors.

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