

# The Ministry of Shepherding <sup>Ⓞ</sup>

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake (Psalm 23:1-3).*

## The Lord is My Shepherd

When was the last time you saw a shepherd? Although you probably have some idea of what shepherds are like and what they do, few of us in this post-industrial, post-modern culture have ever actually seen one.

Shepherds appear throughout the biblical narratives, beginning with Abel in Genesis 4. The best-known chapter in all the Bible, Psalm 23, is about shepherding. Jesus took the image of the shepherd as a primary metaphor to represent his relationship to us, and John's revelation promises that Jesus will be our shepherd throughout eternity (7:17).

Jesus' most famous discourse on shepherding is found in John 10, where he said, "*I am the good shepherd*" (10:1-18). In that passage, Jesus described his relationship with his followers as personal, intimate, and mutually affectionate. He suggested that his shepherding offers protection, guidance, and friendship. Peter would later write that our calling is to imitate the example left for us by Jesus, following "*in his steps*" (1 Peter 2:21). Since Jesus is the Good Shepherd, persons in ministry sometimes refer to themselves as "undershepherds," as we offer care in his name.

The Greek word for "shepherd" is ποιμην (poimén), and the study of shepherding skills for leadership in the church was once called "poimenics." Today it is much more common to talk about "pastoral care." A person who is a "pastor" (from Latin, pastus) is a "shepherd."

That dimension of Christian ministry that is known as "pastoral care" is not restricted to persons who hold or aspire to the office of "pastor." Whatever the nature of the call which has brought you to seminary, you will have daily opportunities to offer pastoral care to choir members, youth groups, GA's and RA's, study groups . . . and other seminary friends. It is this ministry to which this chapter will introduce you.

So what IS pastoral care? My favorite definition of pastoral care is Rodney Hunter's affirmation that pastoral care "is concerned with discovering how to care for others in their concrete contingencies and problems so as to stimulate or enable their life of faith and their practical knowledge of God."<sup>1</sup> I like this focus on real-life issues and on "practical knowledge of God." The most famous definition, however, is the one Clebsch and Jaekle offered more than thirty years ago:

The ministry of the cure of souls, or pastoral care, consists of helping acts, done by representative Christian persons, directed toward the healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>Ⓞ</sup> David C. Stancil, Ph.D., in *Preparing for Ministry: An Evangelical Approach*, ed. David Gushee and Walter Jackson (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1996), pp. 205-218.

<sup>1</sup> Rodney J. Hunter, "The Future of Pastoral Theology," *Pastoral Psychology*, 29 (1980), 69.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral Care in Historical Perspective: An Essay with Exhibits* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 4).

We will return to this definition later, especially to “healing,” “sustaining,” “guiding,” and “reconciling.” For now, though, we need to think about the distinctions between “pastoral care,” “pastoral counseling,” and “pastoral psychotherapy,” because these are often confused.

Airtight distinctions between these concepts are not possible, because they are similar in many ways, and oversimplifications are inevitable. For example, all three types of care may be either preventive or restorative in their focus. Preventive care helps folks to develop attitudes, skills, and character qualities that will assist them in moving through life in the direction of spiritual growth and maturity, and which tend to reduce the likelihood of “shipwreck.”

Restorative care focuses on assisting persons in moving through life crises successfully, whether these crises be developmental or eruptive in quality. Developmental crises include such things as the “identity” crises of adolescence, of moving away from home to establish one’s own nuclear family (which may be either as a single person or as a married person), of beginning one’s first job, of mid-life re-valuing, or of retirement. Developmental crises are fairly predictable parts of the human life-cycle. Eruptive crises, while not “abnormal,” don’t fit a predictable schedule. These crises include such events as accidents, disease, divorce, being fired or laid off, and untimely death.

We could generally say that pastoral counseling tends to focus on eruptive crises, while pastoral psychotherapy tends to focus on developmental crises. Both counseling and psychotherapy are the work of ministers with specialized training (beyond what you will receive in an M.Div., though we’ll get you started), and these modes of care involve formal, scheduled sequences of conversations. Pastoral care, on the other hand, is the province of all ministers, tends to be informal, occurs in the context of daily relationships, and may respond to both eruptive and developmental crises.

### What’s “Pastoral” about Pastoral Care?

To care for other persons is an intrinsic quality of being human. What makes some caring “pastoral”? Pastoral caring is distinguished by the identity of the caregiver, the context in which the care is given, the ethic by which the care is governed, and the goal toward which the care is directed. Let’s look at these.

#### The Person: Pastoral Identity

Clebsch and Jaekle’s definition states that “pastoral” care is “representative” care. Ordination is one way in which congregations authorize particular persons to represent the community as a whole. Whether or not the caregiver is an ordained person, however, the representative dimension of the community is crucial for care to be pastoral. While it is often one-on-one, pastoral care is not “lone-ranger” care.

Whether you are a Sunday School teacher, a youth worker, a GA leader, or a choirmaster, such service involves being selected—and generally elected—as a representative of the community for leadership. As you consider your “flock,” do you give evidence of a shepherd’s sense of responsibility? Do you experience a deep affection for those under your care? Like the Good Shepherd, are you willing to go out into the wilderness searching for the

ones who are lost (Luke 15:1-7)? Do you pray for them? Are you concerned about their spiritual growth? As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “*Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn*” (2 Corinthians 11:28-29)?

### The Context: Congregational Accountability

Because it is representative care, pastoral caregiving is an intensification of the ministry of the Church, and is accountable to the Church—most particularly the local congregation in whose name it is offered. The church, whether “universal” or local, is an imperfect and very human institution, full of persons like you and me who are still working out what it means to be “in Christ.”

Your experience with the church may be positive or negative to this point—seminarians come from many backgrounds—but whatever your experience with it, the Church is not just another humanly-created institution. In the mystery of God’s plan, “*His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Ephesians 3:10-11; italics added).

For good or ill, then, pastoral caring stands within and represents the wisdom—and brokenness—of the church. Pastoral caregivers rejoice that the Church is the Bride of Christ, and commit themselves “*to present her to [him] as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless*” (Ephesians 5:27).

### The Ethic: Biblical Values

The behavioral sciences have attempted for decades to be “value-neutral,” but are beginning to realize that efforts to be value-free are ill-begotten and are really impossible. It is possible not to be aware of one’s operative values, but it not possible not to have any. Christian pastoral caring affirms that the anchor for our values and our commitments is the Bible, which is “*God-breathed and . . . useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the [person] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

As you begin your formal theological training, your understanding of yourself, of others, of God, and of life will be profoundly deepened. You will discover new ways to understand and to interpret God’s Word. This is as it should be. While you are reading the Bible for class assignments, however, do not fail to be much in the Word for your own spiritual growth. The two approaches are rather different. As Helmut Thielicke noted,

If . . . I move away from reading the Word of God as a document addressed to me personally, adopting instead an entirely detached, “professional” approach, then I have lost a precious treasure, and have taken “the first step towards the worst and most widespread ministers’ disease.” To move from “Lord Jesus, you have promised,” to “the documents reveal this or that” is to have moved into the “far country” of the spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 32-33.

## The Goal: Wholeness Centered in Christ

Finally, the central goal of pastoral caring is that “Christ be formed” in the lives of the persons with whom we work.<sup>4</sup> Pastoral caring involves asking questions which uncover the points at which persons have become broken and wounded in spirit, so that the good news of Christ may be conveyed appropriately to these points of pain. As Jacques Ellul exclaimed, we cannot keep silent

when we know that there is a living hope in Christ, a power which can cause hope to be born. We do not have the right to hide this and cover it up under the pretext that we are in danger of indulging in apologetics and that we have no right to influence people. When this person is in trouble, why should I not come to his aid? Why not bring him what he needs?<sup>5</sup>

We desire more than for folks to be “healthy.” We want them to “*grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that [they] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God*” (Ephesians 3:18b-19).

### What Does “Caring” Look Like?

Having said all this, what do we do when we offer pastoral caring? There are many skills involved in caregiving, but foremost among them is the ability to listen, to really listen. Active listening is intense, hard work, which is why we tend to do it so seldom. Still, listening is the key to all relationships—with ourselves, with others, and with God. Active listening exposes us to others’ pain as well as to their hope. Active listening changes both of us. As Doug Manning has observed, “the ear is the most powerful part of the human body. People are healed by the laying on of ears.”<sup>6</sup> And so it is that pastoral caregivers listen before forming opinions, making assumptions or statements about “right” and “wrong,” giving advice, asking or answering questions, offering words of encouragement or forgiveness, sharing scripture, or praying. The first task is to hear the question.

While listening is the primary mechanism of pastoral caring, it operates through the functions of: “healing,” “sustaining,” “guiding,” “reconciling,” and “nurturing.”<sup>7</sup> Let’s look briefly at these in turn.

Healing is that pastoral function in which a representative Christian person helps another person to be restored to a condition of wholeness, a restoration that also achieves a new level of spiritual insight and welfare. The wholeness which pastoral healing seeks to achieve is not simple restoration of prior circumstances, but integration on a higher spiritual level than was previously experienced.

Sustaining consists of helping a hurting person to endure and to transcend a circumstance in which restoration to a former condition or recuperation from present illness is

<sup>4</sup> Wayne E. Oates, *The Christian Pastor* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C.E. Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> Doug Manning, *Don’t Take My Grief Away* (Hereford, TX: Insight Books, 1979), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Seward Hiltner was the first to identify the functions of “healing,” “sustaining,” and “guiding.” Clebsch and Jaekle added “reconciling” to the list. See Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), pp. 89-174 and Clebsch and Jaekle, pp. 32-66.

either impossible or is so remote as to seem improbable. Such sustaining goes beyond mere resignation, reaching toward spiritual growth through endurance and faithfulness in unwanted, harmful, or dangerous experiences.

Guiding consists in assisting persons in making choices between alternative courses of thought and action, especially when such choices are viewed as affecting the present and future state of the soul. Guidance commonly employs two complementary modes. Eductive guidance tends to draw out of the individual's own experiences and value the criteria and resources for life decisions, while inductive guidance tends to lead the individual to adopt an a priori set of values and criteria by which to make decisions. For Christian caregivers, inductive guidance should usually be grounded in scripture.

Reconciling seeks to re-establish broken relationships between persons and between persons and God. Reconciliation is the antithesis of alienation, and may be seen to be the ultimate purpose of God (Ephesians 3: 10-11). Both axes of reconciliation function together; i.e., both horizontal and vertical dimensions need to be attended. The Christian disciplines of repentance, confession, and restitution work together with the grace of forgiveness to accomplish this task.

These four pastoral functions should be understood as working together, not in isolation. Rare indeed would be the occasion in which only one of them is brought to bear on a particular situation. They are dimensions of pastoral relationships. Taken together, I like to call healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling the ministry of "nurturing."<sup>8</sup>

Nurturing is centered on the birthing and development of persons who witness to the reality of the Kingdom of God, who embody the life of the Kingdom in daily experience, and who continually seek to enlarge the compass of the Kingdom in the world. As such, it is caring which may be offered to families and to congregations as well as to individuals. It is God's desire that those who are given the gifts of pastoral leadership should "*prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Individuals, families, and churches are always "on the journey" toward such maturity, and those who are undershepherds along the way have the responsibility and the joy of nurturing this growth . . . even as we continue to grow ourselves. Such nurturing requires considerable patience.

My favorite metaphor for such "pastoral patience" is the "story of the streetcar."<sup>9</sup> It happened one day that a man got on a streetcar in San Francisco—not the speediest of vehicles—and rather quickly began to berate the conductor, "Can't you go any faster?! Can't you go any faster"!? The conductor took it all in good humor, but after a while he felt constrained to make a response. The next time the passenger launched into noisy impatience, the conductor replied, "Yes, I could go faster, but my job is to stay on the streetcar." That's the task of pastoral nurture: to "stay on the streetcar" so long as God leaves us in that responsibility. The point, of course, is that the goal is not to get the conductor—nor even the streetcar—to the end of the line, but to get the passengers there.

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<sup>8</sup> See Howard Clinebell, *Basic Types of Pastoral Care and Counseling: Resources for the Ministry of Healing and Growth*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), pp. 42-43.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Scott Tatum, one of my preaching professors at Southwestern Seminary, for this story.

## Six Principles for Pastoral Care

By now you may be wondering to yourself, “who is equal to such a task”? That’s a very good question, to which the answer must be: none of us is . . . by ourselves. The good news is that God has given us some principles by which to work. I’ll suggest six.<sup>10</sup>

### The Principle of Love

The central principle for pastoral caring is rooted in the Great Commandment, where Jesus called on us to “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . [and] Love your neighbor as yourself*” (Matthew 22:37-39). The Principle of Love means that we invest ourselves in an active, caring concern for the welfare of others, seeing past their brokenness and sin to see persons made in the image of God. I continue to be challenged by the realization that when we stand before the Lord for judgment, we will not be asked questions about theology so much as about behavior: “*Did you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick? Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me*” (Matthew 25:40).

### The Principle of Sensitivity

How many times did Jesus say, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*” (Luke 8:8b), and what did he mean by this enigmatic instruction? I think that he was talking about listening for the questions beneath the questions, for the meaning beneath the words, so that we hear the deepest questions of the heart, and offer care at that core level. We can see at least four dimensions of such sensitivity in the ministry of Jesus.

Material seekers. The first sensitivity is to persons who seek “non-spiritual” help. The woman with the hemorrhage (Matthew 9:20-22) came to Jesus for physical healing. Sometimes folks want food, clothing, or help with the rent (see principle #1!), but their deeper need is a heart-hunger. Our task—our opportunity—is to respond at both levels (James 2:15-16).

Hesitant seekers. Sometimes persons came to Jesus as “peripheral seekers.” Zacchaeus was such a person, drawn to Jesus, but not knowing why. There is much about their luncheon conversation we would like to overhear, but it is clear that Jesus got to the “heart” of the matter and helped Zacchaeus see that his hunger was for redemption: for a clear spirit with God, with himself, and with those he had cheated (Luke 19:1-10).

Intense seekers. Occasionally, we are privileged to talk with persons who know that their questions are spiritual in nature. Nicodemus was such an “intense seeker,” who earnestly pressed Jesus, asking, “*How can this be*” (John 3:1-15)? In such cases, we can head straight for the cross, as Jesus did (John 3:16).

Aimless seekers. Most of the time, though, our sensitivity is challenged by seekers who have no clue what they hunger for. The woman at the well of Sychar was “looking for love in

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<sup>10</sup> These principles are adapted from Homer Carter, *Equipping Deacons in Caring Skills* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1980), pp. 10-12; and from James Hightower, *Called to Care: Helping People through Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1990), pp. 19-20.

all the wrong places” . . . until she met Jesus. “I have water,” Jesus told her, “that will get to the root of your thirst” (John 4:1-26).

### The Principle of Presence

The Principles of Love and of Sensitivity could feel a lot more like demand than like grace, were it not for the next four principles. The Principle of Presence is based on a promise God made to Moses (Exodus 3:11-12) and to Joshua (Joshua 1:5), and which Jesus then extended to us (Matthew 28:20). It is a principle of encouragement and of anchoring support: “*I will be with you.*” Never do we enter the arena of care without the empowering presence of the Spirit. This principle is at work in the lives of those with whom we walk, as well. Never will we talk with someone in whose heart the Spirit of God is not at work!

One of the tasks of pastoral caring is to be physically present with persons on the journey. They may not remember what we said, but they will remember that we were there. Because God’s Spirit acts through us to care for them, if we are able to be emotionally present with them through effective listening, they will also remember that God was there.

### The Principle of Guidance

The Principle of Guidance builds on the first three principles to assure us that, as we are present with others, God will guide our very words. As Jesus said, “*You will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you*” (Matthew 10:19-20).

You probably have a personal computer, or will soon get one. If so, you are probably familiar with “hard drives.” A hard drive is a storage device from which your computer gets its resources to follow your commands (you hope!). A new hard drive will come with lots of free software on it, but not much of that is very useful. In order to be useful to me, hard drives have to be loaded with the programs and documents that I need for my work.

The Principle of Guidance is sort of like a hard drive. God will not “load your heart drive” for you. That is the reason for the psalmist’s rhetorical question, “*How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. . . . I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you*” (Psalm 119:9, 11).

The study and memorization of scripture is one of the ways of “loading your heart drive” (seminary study is another). That is the work of obedience. Jesus’ promise of divine guidance is that, once we have “loaded the drive,” the Spirit will “call to the screen” those words, verses, and principles we need in the moment of witness and ministry. That is the work of grace.

### The Principle of Adequacy

Not only will God be with us, not only will the Spirit guide us, but what we offer in Jesus’ name will be enough. It will be adequate. The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 shows us that Jesus takes what we offer him, and causes it to be enough (Matthew 14:13-21).

This is not to say that we always are in possession of all the skills and all the knowledge that are needed for the present situation (here you sit in seminary, after all!). It is to say, though, that however inadequate our effort in the scheme of things, if it is offered genuinely

and in the name of Jesus, God will honor it. If we have “loaded our heart drive,” and speak through the wisdom of the indwelling Spirit of God, then we live in the promise that “*my word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it*” (Isaiah 55:11). As Paul would later note, “*neither he who plants nor [she] who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow*” (1 Corinthians 3:7).

### The Principle of Self-Care

The first five principles still have danger about them, though, without the Principle of Self-Care. Immediately after feeding the 5,000 Jesus “*withdrew again into the hills by himself*” (John 6:15, emphasis added). The Principle of Self-Care has two dimensions, the dimension of retreat, of which this is an example, and the principle of celebration, of which the wedding at Cana is one example (John 2:1-11).

All ministry and no rest or celebration makes Jack and Jill burned-out caregivers. Jesus spent time in retreat and prayer much more often than most of us are inclined to do, and he was also criticized for his much eating, drinking, hiking, camping, and fishing (Luke 7:33-34). The world knows how to be burned-out. What the world hungers for is to see persons who embody abundant life! One good measure of how you’re doing with the sixth principle is to check your “joy meter.” Is your life feeling “abundant” these days? Abundant life often takes a beating in seminary. What do you need to do to live in joy?

### Jesus, the Good Shepherd, at Work

As we near the end of this overview, I’d like to point you again to the example of Jesus as a model for your own ministry. The encounter I’d like to look at is recorded in Mark 8:22-26. It’s the story of the healing of a blind man.

After the man’s friends brought him to Jesus, Jesus took him outside the village. This was unusual behavior for Jesus. Perhaps it was a way for him to connect with this man, to meet his particular needs, which are not apparent to us. In any event, when Jesus took the blind man’s hand and led him outside the village, he established a personal relationship with him that was an important element in the man’s confidence that Jesus could help him.

Pastoral caregiving is a coming apart from the group in ways very much like Jesus’ taking of the blind man outside the village. The goal of pastoral caregiving is to focus the ministries of healing, guiding, sustaining, reconciling, and nurturing in such a way that crises and other life events become instruments of God’s grace.

After they got to a more isolated spot, Jesus spit on the man’s eyes, and then asked whether the treatment had been effective. I don’t know about you, but this part of the story has always seemed both strange and unpleasant to me. Part of the message of the spit, I think, is that soul healing can be a pretty messy endeavor. By the time persons have realized that they are broken and wounded in spirit, their wounds are quite often “infected.” The process of healing requires that the pastoral caregiver be willing to help “lance the wound” . . . and that the wounded person be willing to endure the pain of healing.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The pastoral function of sustaining reminds us that not all problems can be removed. Eliminating the “problem” may not be as important as establishing faithful relationships that can be for you signs of God’s steadfastness and grace.

After spitting on the man's eyes, Jesus asked him, "*Do you see anything?*" The man responded that he saw people who looked like "*trees walking around.*" The man participated in the process of his own healing by responding to Jesus out of his own inner experience—as is true in contemporary caring as well.

After the man's response, Jesus touched his eyes again, and this "second touch" brought full healing and restoration. Perhaps this can represent the fact that spiritual healing is not so much instantaneous as it is a process. Persons usually do not become broken and wounded in a single moment. The process of soul healing, like the process of physical healing, usually requires time, as old patterns of behavior are discarded and new ways of being in relationships are learned.

The task of the pastoral caregiver is much like the work of a gardener. By careful listening and by gentle probing into the soil of the spirit, pastoral caregivers discover seeds that need planting, that are germinating, that need watering, or that have died. The caregiver, with the help of the person desiring wholeness, may sow a little, water a little, cultivate a little, and prune a little, so that God may have greater freedom to cause the fruit of the Spirit to ripen and to bear more fruit.

Pastoral caregiving, then, is one way in which the Body of Christ is strengthened and the presence of Jesus is felt. Jesus met people where they were, mired in the muck of their own attempts at living, and gave them permission to begin again. Pastoral caregivers are midwives of eternity, seeing in persons more than they are able to see in themselves, as Jesus did. Pastoral caregivers listen for the point or the points at which the Gospel fits the pain, and attempt to make that Good News hearable through personal caring ministry. When this takes place, life begins to reveal the extraordinary possibilities God has promised.

## FOR FURTHER READING

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