

THE

[PASTOR]

AND

[COUNSELING]

THE BASICS OF SHEPHERDING
MEMBERS IN NEED



JEREMY PIERRE & DEEPAK REJU

“Biblical counseling, grounded in the sufficiency and authority of Scripture, is essential to the health of the church. Here is a remarkably helpful introduction to pastoral counseling, brimming with sage, biblical wisdom for both new and seasoned pastors. Every pastor needs this book.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President and Joseph Emerson Brown Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This book is faithful to God, thoughtful, and realistic about people. It’s clearly written, simple, and practical. We all struggle. How can you and your church learn to care well? Take this book to heart.”

David Powlison, Executive Director, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

“This is a book on how pastors should listen to their church members and speak to them, a book on how we should love. It is eminently biblical, practical, and refreshing. Perhaps we should make it required reading for all new elders.”

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; President, 9Marks

“This book demonstrates to busy pastors that the work of counseling is not only required but possible. If you are overwhelmed by this critical task, Pierre and Reju will steer you through the confusion. Their deep convictions about Scripture have been tested in the crucible of pastoral ministry. I am excited for you to learn from them in these pages.”

Heath Lambert, Executive Director, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors; Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“*The best primer* for pastoral counseling I’ve read—and I’ve read many. Frankly, it is the equivalent of at least two excellent seminary courses on pastoral counseling. Read it, apply it, and be equipped for the personal ministry of God’s Word.”

Robert W. Kelleman, Vice President, Institutional Development; Chair, Biblical Counseling Department, Crossroads Bible College

“A gem on the privilege and necessity of shepherding God’s people, this winsomely written primer is loaded with invaluable perspectives, guidelines, and insights on how to love others well during their time of need. I wholeheartedly commend it.”

Robert K. Cheong, Pastor of Care, Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, Kentucky

“A balanced approach to both theory and methodology in one volume, this book will be a great asset for the busy pastor who wants to do biblical counseling but doesn’t know where to start. One’s appetite for truth and practical help will be satisfied, and the fear of counselees and their problems will lessen.”

Rod Mays, Adjunct Professor of Counseling, Reformed Theological Seminary; Executive Pastor, Mitchell Road Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

“One of the most important and perhaps most overwhelming things ministers do is counseling. This book provides pastors with a basic framework to approach the troubles and suffering of the people they are privileged to shepherd.”

Justin S. Holcomb, Episcopal Priest; Professor of Christian Thought, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Pastoring is hard work, a labor of love that requires theological know-how and the heart of Jesus for people who are suffering or straying. This is the best primer available, pointing pastors to the wisdom found only in the Bible and outlining basic methods and procedures for personal ministry.”

Sam R. Williams, Professor of Counseling, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Pierre and Reju faithfully point pastors to the life-transforming good news of Jesus Christ as both the means and the goal of change in counseling. I wish I had read such a book when I began ministry. It would have alleviated many fears about counseling and better equipped me to shepherd my congregation. This primer will be at the top of the list for our interns to read for pastoral counseling.”

Phil A. Newton, Senior Pastor, South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee

“Anything we don’t understand is scarier than it needs to be. This book does an excellent job overviewing the counseling process, identifying common pitfalls, and providing intuitive protocols. It will orient you to your role in the process so that your fears do not distract you from caring for God’s people.”

Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church, Durham, North Carolina

“A counseling book where the starting point is the Word of God and the objective is a deeper understanding of the gospel, this book is loaded with practical, scriptural insights that can be applied immediately. You’ll find yourself referring to it constantly when counseling.”

Robby Gallaty, Senior Pastor, Brainerd Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tennessee

“Pierre and Reju have given pastors everywhere a much-needed primer on biblical counseling. This book will tear down the walls of anxiety that pastors feel as they counsel their congregants in a manner worthy of the gospel.”

Dave Furman, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Church of Dubai

“Here is a great help for busy pastors who seek to fulfill their shepherding role through counseling hurting people. The step-by-step approach discusses a variety of issues counselors face and offers practical advice for each stage in the context of developing a culture of discipleship within the church.”

Richard P. Belcher Jr., Professor of Old Testament and Academic Dean, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina

“A complex subject like pastoral counseling is well served by a helpful, biblical, and condensed guide like *The Pastor and Counseling*. Pierre and Reju deftly summarize the most important aspects of soul care. I highly recommend this book to any pastor as a starter or refresher.”

Stuart W. Scott, Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“What more could the pastor ask for than a manual providing reasonable, understandable helps on shepherding the flock. Giving hope and help to shepherds in their God-given calling, this book is a must read.”

Thomas Zempel, Pastor of Care Ministry, Colonial Baptist Church, Cary, North Carolina; Professor of Counseling, Shepherds Seminary

“This is one of the first books every shepherd of a local flock should own. It is at once reverently Christ-centered and accessibly practical. Step-by-step the authors outline how pastors can walk alongside hurting people, giving hope and help.”

Chris Brauns, Pastor, The Red Brick Church, Stillman Valley, Illinois

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 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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To pastors
who bear many troubles
not theirs

To honor the One
who took a world of trouble
not his

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Series Preface

The 9Marks series of books is premised on two basic ideas. First, the local church is far more important to the Christian life than many Christians today perhaps realize. We at 9Marks believe that a healthy Christian is a healthy church member.

Second, local churches grow in life and vitality as they organize their lives around God's Word. God speaks. Churches should listen and follow. It's that simple. When a church listens and follows, it begins to look like the One it is following. It reflects his love and holiness. It displays his glory. A church will look like him as it listens to him. By this token, the reader might notice that all "9 marks," taken from Mark Dever's book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), begin with the Bible:

- expositional preaching
- biblical theology
- a biblical understanding of the gospel
- a biblical understanding of conversion
- a biblical understanding of evangelism
- a biblical understanding of church membership
- a biblical understanding of church discipline
- a biblical understanding of discipleship and growth
- a biblical understanding of church leadership

Series Preface

More can be said about what churches should do in order to be healthy, such as pray. But these nine practices are the ones that we believe are most often overlooked today (unlike prayer). So our basic message to churches is, don't look to the best business practices or the latest styles; look to God. Start by listening to God's Word again.

Out of this overall project comes the 9Marks series of books. These volumes intend to examine the nine marks more closely and from different angles. Some target pastors. Some target church members. Hopefully all will combine careful biblical examination, theological reflection, cultural consideration, corporate application, and even a bit of individual exhortation. The best Christian books are always both theological and practical.

It's our prayer that God will use this volume and the others to help prepare his bride, the church, with radiance and splendor for the day of his coming.

INTRODUCTION

The Pastor and Wednesday Morning

It's Tuesday afternoon, and you are waging war with your inbox when your secretary buzzes. A church member is asking to speak to you, and it's trouble. With a quick prayer that is more like a sigh, you pick up the phone and wade into a half-hour conversation that confuses you and, you're sure, confuses her too. You hang up, your mind racing with what to do with this sudden revelation of just how bad things are between her and her husband. You'll be seeing the two of them first thing the next day to iron some of this out. How do you begin to prepare for Wednesday morning?

Pastors and lay leaders alike are familiar with phone calls like this. Probably too familiar. Stubborn depression, heart-wrenching adultery, volcanic anger, chronic miscommunication, guilt-ridden pornography struggles, calorie-phobic eating disorders, recurrent cancer, hidden same-sex attraction, suicidal thinking—and that's the short list. Life in a fallen world is

touched with misery. For some, it's submerged in it. That goes for folks inside the church as well as those outside.

This is why you are a pastor. God has called you to shepherd his sheep, and often those sheep are hurting, confused, or stubborn. But it's not always clear how to care for them, especially in the more complex situations that weigh them down. You may or may not think of yourself as a counseling pastor, but the bottom line is that you are called to labor for your people in these unsettling problems. And this is a worthy labor.

We offer this primer because in our line of work we frequently get last-minute phone calls from pastors who need help thinking carefully through tough situations at church.

In fifteen minutes, I am meeting with a couple who are about to get a divorce. Here's what I'm thinking of doing . . .

A young man at our church just admitted to me that he has same-sex attraction. I need to follow up, but I don't know what to say . . .

Some parents at my church recently put it together that their daughter is anorexic. Is there a place to refer them to?

Most pastors are short on time and burdened with many other responsibilities. Add to this a few common facts that plague the work of a pastor:

- Most seminary students take just one or two counseling classes in their degree programs. They often underestimate how much counseling they will do when they reach their first pastorate.
- Most pastors enter the pastorate to preach and teach, not to counsel. They counsel because it is an expected part of the job, not because they are excited to do it.

- Both smaller and larger churches have people who have made messes of their lives. Small churches, especially those in rural areas, often have very few resources in their community to draw on for help. A pastor and church are sometimes the only available resources.
- Church members expect their pastor to help them with their struggles. After all, the members fund the pastor's salary. They expect him to give them his time, often a lot of it. They may even assume the pastor has instant access to the Bible's answer for the troubles of life.
- Weak sheep tend to consume a disproportionate amount of the pastor's schedule with their problems, demands, and sometimes just general selfishness. Often this comes with very little gratitude to God for the Christlike care given through their pastor and the church.
- Most church members let their problems get far worse than they need to before they overcome pride and come in for help. Thoughts like "I don't want the pastor to think poorly of me" or "I can handle this on my own" deceive them. If they had sought help earlier, it would have saved everyone a whole lot of sweat and tears.

What should a pastor do with all this? He may have very little training in counseling. He may have weak sheep making exorbitant demands on his time. He may have precious little relational help to draw on in an unhealthy church. It doesn't sound all that promising, does it?

DEAR PASTOR, CAN WE HELP YOU?

We want to help by giving you a basic framework to approach your people's troubles. You may not have a lot of time. You may be fearful of messing someone up permanently. You may simply

not want to deal with this stuff. So what you need is both a reminder that the gospel of Jesus Christ is powerful in these situations and some practical guidance for ministering in light of that power.

Here's what we would like to cover in this short book. In part 1, made up of the first three chapters, we cover the *concept* of counseling. In chapter 1, we set out a vision for what it means to labor for your people. Our point is simple: shepherds shepherd. Pastors are about the task of making disciples, and discipleship will often include counseling people through difficult situations. This fact should neither annoy nor overwhelm you. It doesn't necessarily need to thrill you either, but it should make you see caring for troubled people as part of the privilege of loving Jesus. Feed his sheep. In chapter 2, we help you know how to prepare for counseling—how it starts, who starts it, and how to arrange things to run as smoothly as possible. Chapter 3 lays out the basic method of counseling. We explain a helpful technique to explore a person's trouble and have something redemptive to say to him or her. We discuss the types of questions to ask, the pertinent areas of a person's life to explore, and how to respond in biblically helpful ways.

The second part, chapters 4–6, traces out the *process* of counseling, from the initial meeting to the final conversation. We give tips for recognizing heart dynamics, understanding problems theologically, and employing redemptive strategies for change. We want these chapters to help you answer the question, what does the process of caring for this person look like?

The third and final part, chapters 7 and 8, explains the *context* of counseling. Pastoral counseling occurs within both the church community and a community of resources outside the church. Chapter 7 deals with the reality that you, the pastor,

cannot labor alone. It's not possible for you to do everything and still stay sane yourself. So we'll help you think about what it means to develop a culture of discipleship in your church that will supplement and enrich whatever counseling occurs. What does it mean to develop a culture in which members help one another thrive in their faith? Chapter 8 then looks outside to the community to see what counselors, doctors, or other relational resources are available. Is it ever wise to refer outside the church? If you do, how can you be confident a particular doctor is going to help and not hurt your church member? What if you can't find a like-minded counselor in your community, but only those who work from a naturalistic standpoint? Questions abound.

We close the book with a number of helpful practical resources, from a simple definition of biblical counseling to a method for taking notes. These are meant for your use, and we hope they aid you in this worthy labor.

THE REAL POWER IN COUNSELING— JESUS CHRIST

Honestly, no one expects one little book to change your world. Our goal is not to enable you to handle anything that comes your way. The goal, rather, is to give you confidence that in the gospel you have the categories you need to navigate the troubles of your people. Your confidence is not in some super-developed counseling technique, or even in yourself, but in God's power to change people.

Real confidence is rooted in the life-transforming power of the good news of Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus is the model of how human beings function best. And he came to a malfunctioning world as a substitute for malfunctioning human beings

like us. Sin estranges us from God. It estranges everything from God. This is why we suffer and this is why we sin. But Jesus reconciles what was estranged by making payment for sin by his death. And now Jesus lives again, transforming people to live according to his righteousness, according to a reestablished relationship with God. It is God, through his glorious Son, who changes people.

Here's what we mean more specifically: We human beings were created to display God's character in the way we think, in what we desire, and in how we act. When a hardened thought, a lustful desire, or a selfish intention emerges in the human heart, that heart is failing to display the character of its Creator, which is patient, pure, and generous to others. In short, everything inside and outside a person was designed to glorify God.

Jesus's heart was the only one that perfectly displayed the character of God—because he is God himself. But he is also human, like us. Therefore, he is fit to be our representative, our example, our rescuer (Heb. 4:14–16). For counseling, we should therefore keep the following in mind:

- Jesus Christ is *the means of change*. Believing his gospel changes our hearts' responses. All theoretical wisdom and practical advice in counseling should most centrally promote a relationship with Jesus Christ through faith.
- Jesus Christ is *the goal of change*. Displaying his character is the model of maturity we strive for. Circumstances may not change and problems may not go away through counseling, but God promises the power to respond in ways that reflect the trusting obedience of his Son.

Counseling in its simplest form is one person seeking to walk alongside another person who has lost his or her way. Professional training or academic programs can be very helpful for

honing skill, but even if you have not had these, you can counsel if you wholeheartedly embrace God's Word as that which shows people their greatest needs and their greatest hope.

This labor is worthy of your time, pastor. Our hope is to equip you with the basic tools to start. The framework we lay out here is our attempt to be bold with gospel truth toward the problems that unsettle our people. Frankly, it would be much easier to sweep them all away with generalized pulpit instruction or refer people off somewhere. But it's a worthy labor for a pastor to care skillfully for his people.

Part One

CONCEPT

ONE

Laboring for Your People

Shepherds do not smell good. At least, good shepherds do not smell good. A good shepherd identifies with stinking sheep, and the scent rubs off.

But shepherds stink not only because they smell like sheep. They stink because they smell like sweat. And blood, too. Like common laborers, their faces are streaked and their backs are bent. Like common soldiers, their eyes are strained and their arms are scarred. Like both, they often feel overspent and undersupplied. And they've made peace with the fact that this kind of work requires as much. You'll never meet a good shepherd who is still shower-fresh by the afternoon.

In the same way, you'll never meet a good pastor who has a breezy attitude toward his task. He does not bemoan the hard work required to care for the stubborn and the hurting while still feeding and protecting everyone else. Sure, every pastor has days when he is tempted to look heavenward and ask, why the constant problems from these people? But he finds the faith

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to accept that his task is hard. God made it that way to empty a pastor of himself, so that he may be filled with the power of Christ.

PUBLIC MINISTRY, PERSONAL PROBLEMS

We have never heard the explicit claim that ministry is easy. But we have seen many pastors try to arrange it to be. We've also seen plenty of men head into the pastorate for a pulpit ministry. What they mean by *pulpit ministry* is getting paid to preach and teach, with perhaps a pastoral visit here and there. They know personal ministry and counseling are important, so they usually plan to grow the church budget through their amazing pulpit skills, then hire an associate pastor to do everything else.

We do not mean to sound caustic. We were once young men with visions of leading a loyal people into the great unknown through eloquent exposition and piercing application, the power of the Word radiating from the pulpit like blazing light in the dusky culture. Husbands would take the hands of their wives during our sermons and repent in bitter tears that afternoon. Addicts would decide then and there to never indulge again. Depressed people would come out of their fog under the sound of our voices. Our preaching ministry would be strong enough to make the counseling ministry unnecessary. Or at least mostly unnecessary. Sure, there would be a straggling nut-job here and there, but the church would be healthy because of the preaching ministry.

But two things kept us from persisting in this dream: experience and the Bible. Experience is a strict schoolmaster. It points out right away that we start out as pretty crummy preachers. Even as we become less crummy, we will find that improved preaching does not necessarily correlate with less trouble in the

lives of our people. In fact, pick your favorite preacher, and you will see a church with a bigger budget but no less trouble in the life of its people. Experience won't permit the illusion that preaching is all there is to ministry.

Just to be crystal clear, preaching is *the* vital and central ministry of the Word in the mission of the church. It is a primary purpose of the body's gathering and is foundational to any personal ministry we do. So do not misunderstand our intention here. We are not calling into question the primacy of the preaching ministry. We are merely pointing out that it is not the only place that the ministry of the Word happens in the life of the church.

Experience alone would not be a sufficient teacher to establish this point. Better than simply learning from what doesn't work in the real world is learning what constitutes shepherding by looking to the Bible.

PERSONAL MINISTRY IN SCRIPTURE

Peter's eyes were probably weary as the morning sun was just starting to warm the beach. He probably studied Jesus's resurrected face closely as they ate breakfast in silence, all the disciples too timid to ask if it was really he. They were waiting for Jesus to start the conversation.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

You know the story. Three times Jesus asked Peter if he truly loved him. By the third time, Peter was grieved that Jesus would seem so unconvinced by his affirmative answers. But each time, Jesus was instructing Peter how to demonstrate genuine love for him: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15–19). Loving Jesus involves caring for those who are his. And caring for those who are his will involve death. For Peter, it was literal

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death. Jesus predicted “by what kind of death he was to glorify God” (v. 19).

Ministry Is Suffering

While we recognize that Peter’s calling as an apostle was unique to him, we also understand that the path of following Jesus in leading his church will include both labor in feeding sheep and suffering at the hands of others.

Many years later, the seasoned Peter would make this connection urgently clear:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Pet. 5:1–4)

Peter’s authority as an apostle was due, in part, to his witness of the sufferings of Christ. He focused on Christ’s suffering because it was necessary to the glory to be revealed. This is a major theme of Peter’s letter (1 Pet. 1:6–7, 11; 2:21–25; 3:13–17, 18–22; 4:1, 7, 12–19). Peter would one day participate in this glory, and so will every pastor who shepherds the flock of God until Christ’s return.

But to get there, shepherds will suffer. Why else would Peter have to instruct his readers to take on this task willingly, even eagerly, and not under obligation? We don’t naturally take on tasks that do not profit us (“not for shameful gain”) or that we

cannot ensure will go our way (“not domineering over those in your charge”). We don’t naturally want to get close enough to model faithfulness in suffering. But the words of Jesus to Peter that morning on the beach probably echoed in the apostle’s mind as he penned this exhortation to his fellow pastors. “Shepherd the flock of God” sounds a lot like “Feed my lambs.”

Peter saw Jesus ascend into heaven, and it made whatever toil he had to face on behalf of his people well worth it. He knew that Jesus took his place in heaven to be the chief Shepherd, one who would be ultimately responsible for watching over every sheep. This is indeed a worthy labor.

Ministry Is Personal

But so far, we have only shown that Scripture indicates shepherding God’s flock to involve labor and suffering; we have not yet shown that the toil is not merely in public proclamation, but also in personal ministry. To do so, let’s look to Paul as a prime example of a man who toiled in public proclamation while also engaging in the labor of personal ministry.

Paul was a public beacon of gospel preaching, and he was called by God to suffer in this labor (Acts 9:15–16). He proclaimed the gospel openly in the synagogues, and this brought threats of death (9:20–25). Paul proclaimed the good news publicly in Cyprus (13:4), Antioch (13:14), Iconium (14:1), various cities of Lycaonia (14:6–7), and countless other places. A major portion of Paul’s ministry was the public proclamation of the gospel.

But if we were to conclude there, we would have to ignore significant portions of Paul’s ministry. His letters to the churches displayed the heart of a man who had labored many long hours in caring for God’s people. In fact, he refers to his suffering and

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labor amid people as the credentials that prove his calling by God in opposition to those who used earthly impressiveness to prove theirs. He underwent beatings, stonings, and shipwreck to labor personally for God's people (2 Cor. 11:23–30). Paul speaks of his own ministry as flowing from "affectionate desire" for those under his care, a desire so strong that he, Silvanus, and Timothy "were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8). He underwent "labor and toil," earning a living so as not to be a burden on them, so that he could say, "Like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory" (2:11–12). There's a man who labored among his people for their good.

Paul's was not a pulpit-only ministry. His care for others didn't end with their participation in his public ministry, which is a temptation for all pastors. Pastors, if we are viewing our job primarily in terms of our public influence, then we will lose the heart for personal ministry. Sometimes we are more bothered by the thought of people leaving our church than we are by the thought of them hurting. But this was not Paul's heart, and it wasn't the heart of the One he followed.

The rest of the New Testament expounds on the personal nature of pastoral ministry. Three of its teachings will prove helpful in our consideration of the task of counseling. Personal ministry involves (1) identifying with the weakness and sin of people, (2) speaking to God on behalf of people, and (3) speaking to people on behalf of God.

Pastoral labor involves identifying with the weakness and sin of people. Condescension. We usually use this word nega-

tively because it implies that a person thinks he is superior to others, yet resigns himself to coming down to their level. But the term *condescension* is perfectly appropriate to Jesus's association with sinners, since he *does* exist on a plane above ours. He existed in perfect joy and satisfaction with the Father, God of all, bright and majestic, served by the flaming angels of heaven, with no obligation to people below, wicked and sorrowful from sin. Yet the only being in all the universe who should be served by everyone instead served everyone. He considered the interests of others (Phil. 2:4) by not insisting on staying in the contented glory of heaven that was his divine possession (2:6). Instead, he served us by identifying with our troubles (2:7), particularly our main trouble: death (2:8). Death is a problem we could never have solved. We needed the help of another. And the One who helped tells us to follow his example: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (2:5).

Death to ourselves for the good of others requires getting involved in their troubles. Jesus put himself in the position necessary to sympathize with weak people: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Jesus can sympathize with us because he exposed himself to the actual experience of temptation (v. 15b). He entered as a participant in the danger of a sin-cursed world and now can deal gently with the weak and wayward since he understands their weakness (5:2). He who could rightfully exist for all eternity without ever experiencing pain or distress entered a reality where he was characterized by both. He was a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3).

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And so it is with pastors serving Jesus's flock. Jesus stands in the muddy waters of his people's weakness, waywardness, and suffering, and he beckons the pastor to come join him there. Pastors who want to follow have to trudge into unknown waters. The grimy surface keeps them from knowing how deep it gets, and the odor warns them of something unpleasant beneath the surface. But they trust the One who's calling them into it.

Pastor, you are freed to imitate this pattern for the good of your people. Every pastor is a servant of Jesus, and a servant is not greater than his master (John 13:16). You are called to take on the risk and the toil of people's problems. Like Jesus, you help people who, in a sense, have no business demanding help from you. If the chief Shepherd is dirty and cut up, so too those who follow him in this task. This does not necessarily mean that you become the primary counselor of your church, but it certainly means that you need to learn the skills necessary for serving your people in their trouble.

Pastoral labor involves speaking to God on behalf of people. Pastors ought to be eager and constant in prayer. There are at least two advantages to prayer that flow from close association with people in their troubles.

First, personally caring for your people will make your prayers more fervent. A pastor who labors lightly among his people often labors lightly before God. A pastor who agonizes with people will feel some agony in his prayers on their behalf. When pastors move away from personal ministry to almost exclusively public or administrative tasks, they can easily lose sight of the profound needs in their midst, and this will have a numbing effect on their prayers. Jesus taught us to pray to the Father with kingdom desperation (Matt. 6:7–13), and bearing the burdens of your people will drive you to desperate prayer.

When a pastor witnesses the miserable effects of anger in a home, sits with a discouraged widow who feels like she should be over her grief after two years, comes alongside a teenager who's convinced he's the worst pervert in the world, talks with a man who's had it with his marriage—suddenly his desperate need for wisdom becomes more apparent. Witnessing the desperation that sin and its effects cause in people's lives will bring a holy desperation to a pastor's prayers. The misery of the world is often what prompts the prayers of God's people. And pastors must not insulate themselves from this prompting.

Second, personally caring for your people will make your prayers more dependent. Nothing feels more futile than talking a depressed person out of despondency or an anorexic girl out of her unrealistic self-assessment. One of the best ways to feel your inability to change anything is giving counsel to abuse victims or perpetrators, to people with stubborn attitudes or foggy minds, to those who despise you and the Bible you're opening. Coming alongside people in impossible circumstances will be a constant reminder to the pastor of his need for the God of the impossible.

Pastoral labor involves speaking to people on behalf of God. Pastoral labor—including personal ministry—is also closely associated with proclamation. It is outright toil to proclaim Christ to people. Once again, Paul is our pastoral example: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Col. 1:28–29).

In our pastoral labor, Christ is the message and Christlikeness is the goal. We want those in our care to be conformed to Christ, which happens as faith works through love. So the goal

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of a pastor in all his labor is to elicit faith in Christ through the proclamation of his gospel message. This is true in public as well as personal proclamation of the Word. Faith reframes the heart's functions so that a person once animated by sinful desire, darkened thinking, and earthly loyalties is ever-increasingly animated by righteous desire, enlightened thinking, and heavenly loyalties. And the only way faith emerges in the heart is through the ears hearing the message proclaimed: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).

Pastoral labor requires speaking to people on behalf of God in Christ. Paul was so committed to growing believers in Christ that if believers failed to persevere in faith, Paul said his labor would have been in vain (Phil. 2:16; see also Gal. 4:11). Establishing faith was the central goal of all his labors.

Proclaiming Christ requires pastors to go to the dark places in people's lives—those off-putting problems that are simply easier to ignore than to address. It could be marriages that are showing signs of fragmentation, alarming patterns in the life of a teen, disunity between two longtime members, the plaguing doubts of a church staffer, the mental volatility of a young man. Whatever the complexity of people's troubles, you can always ask yourself this orienting question: What does faith in Christ look like in this person's trouble?

Jesus needs to be proclaimed in those dark places. And the pastor must not be afraid to go there. It is true—many of the issues that will confront you in personal ministry are beyond your experience and your ability to handle adequately. But keep in mind two things.

First, as with everything in life, your skill in navigating the dark places is developed only *by practice*. A pastor will grow in his abilities only as he humbly takes on the task of caring

closely for people. Sure, he will make plenty of mistakes along the way—from presuming to understand too much to failing to speak authoritatively out of fear of their response. But mistakes are a necessary part of improvement. The key to minimizing damage is humility. Serve people with the Word and recognize the limits of your perspective. Just how you serve people is what we'll unpack in the coming chapters. Our main point here is simply that fear of failure must not keep you from going into the dark places.

Be assured that you will grow along the way. You will pick up on the subtleties of interpersonal dynamics, assessing trouble, leading a person to recognize patterns of thought or desire, and processing situations in biblically helpful ways. As with a hardwood tree, your growth will be mostly imperceptible when it's happening. But when you look back over months and years, it will be undeniable.

Second, and even more important, your confidence for navigating the dark places is not in you in the first place, but in Christ. Remember the passage that opened our discussion; the goal of ministry is Christ. But remember: the *means* of ministry is also Christ. "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (Col. 1:29). The source of Paul's energy is Christ, and his supply of it is powerful. This is the ground of our confidence and the only reason we would dare to wade into the dark waters of human trouble.

Ultimately, your confidence does not rest on your skill set, no matter how developed. Instead, your confidence is in the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the proclamation of his Word. What goes for the pulpit goes for the counseling room. In one sense, it was easier to be Spirit-dependent in our early days of preaching since we were so aware of our weak-

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ness. As we grow in skill, both exegetically and homiletically, we more easily forget our dependence upon the Lord to speak through his Word. Of course, this could happen in counseling as well, but that might be hard for you to imagine right now. But any sense of inadequacy in counseling should not be reason to avoid it; rather, it should keep you dependent upon God to do what he alone can do.

So, pastor, there is no need to fear the unknown. If you've arranged your pastoral ministry to avoid regular missions into the jagged and rocky places in people's lives, then you are not shepherding like Jesus. The grimy, sweat-streaked face of a pastor is but an image of that blood-streaked face we all love.

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