

PASTORS

# Vol. 04 -- Shepherd the Congregation

*The theology and practice of pastoral care: knowing your people, proactive shepherding, protecting the flock, and caring for those who stray*

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*Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.*



# The Shepherd: The Defining Metaphor of Pastoral Identity

Of all the images the New Testament uses to describe pastoral ministry -- overseer, elder, teacher, steward, herald, ambassador -- none is more comprehensive than shepherd. The shepherd metaphor encompasses everything: protection and provision, guidance and governance, the individual and the community, the immediate crisis and the long-term formation. It is the image Jesus chose for himself ("I am the good shepherd," John 10:11) and the image he assigned to Peter at the close of the Gospel of John ("Feed my sheep," John 21:17). It is the image Peter used when charging elders ("Shepherd the flock of God that is among you," 1 Peter 5:2) and the image Paul deployed when warning the Ephesian elders about the wolves to come (Acts 20:28-29).

What is striking about the shepherd image is that it is simultaneously ordinary and radical. In the ancient Near East, shepherding was mundane, unglamorous manual labor. The shepherd did not hold a prestigious social position. He lived with the animals, which made him perpetually ritually unclean by the standards of the religious culture. And yet God consistently describes himself as Israel's shepherd (Psalm 23; Psalm 80:1; Ezekiel 34), and the greatest human leaders of Israel -- Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David -- were shepherds before they were leaders. The image redeems ordinariness and domesticates power. The greatest leaders in God's economy are those who can be trusted to faithfully carry out unglamorous, sustained, relational care for the vulnerable.

*"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."*

-- John 10:14-16

The defining characteristic Jesus names for the Good Shepherd is knowledge: "I know my own and my own know me." This is not organizational knowledge -- membership records, attendance data, giving units. It is the knowledge of genuine relationship. The word used is *ginosko* -- the same word used of the Father's knowledge of the Son, the same word Paul uses when he says he wants "to know him and the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10). It is deep, personal, experiential knowledge. The pastor who knows his congregation only from the platform -- who can recognize faces but cannot name the specific spiritual condition behind each face -- is not yet shepherding. He is broadcasting.

## Knowing Your People: The Foundation of Pastoral Care

Genuine pastoral care begins with genuine pastoral knowledge. Before you can care for someone's soul, you need to know it -- not perfectly, not exhaustively, but with the kind of familiarity that comes from sustained, intentional attention. This is one of the greatest challenges in contemporary pastoral ministry, because the structures of the modern church tend to separate the pastor from the congregation: the platform, the green room, the professional distance of the counseling office, the administrative demands that keep the pastor at his desk when he should be in the flock.

Richard Baxter's approach in 17th-century Kidderminster is instructive. He visited every family in his congregation regularly -- not just those who presented with pastoral needs, but all of them. He knew what was happening in every household. He engaged every member in conversation about their spiritual state. He did this because he believed that the pastor who does not know his people cannot shepherd them. You cannot pray specifically for what you do not know. You cannot confront what you cannot see. You cannot comfort what you have not heard. You cannot feed what you do not know is hungry.

## Practices for Deep Congregational Knowledge

In a congregation of 50-100, the pastor can realistically aim for meaningful personal knowledge of every member. Regular home visits, consistent pastoral conversation at the margins of congregational life, and an active prayer list that forces engagement with specific people's specific situations can produce the kind of pastoral knowledge that makes genuine care possible. In a congregation of 200-500, the pastor must build systems -- staff teams, small group leaders, pastoral care deacons -- that extend the knowledge network while maintaining his own personal engagement with a representative cross-section.

Several practices help: maintaining a pastoral journal that records significant pastoral conversations, needs, growth moments, and prayer points for each congregant; using the annual giving statement or membership review as an occasion for a brief pastoral contact with every family; establishing a regular rhythm of home visits (even informal ones); building relationships with small group leaders who can serve as pastoral ears in the community; and developing the habit of pastoral observation during Sunday services -- noticing who is absent, who looks burdened, who has had a significant life change in the past week.

## The Pastoral Conversation

One of the most underappreciated pastoral skills is the capacity for deep, spiritually productive informal conversation. Not counseling-office conversation, but parking lot conversation, post-service conversation, coffee-meeting conversation. The pastor who has developed the ability to move a casual conversation into genuine pastoral territory -- with sensitivity and grace, not awkwardly or presumptuously -- will learn more about the spiritual condition of his congregation in those conversations than in any formal survey or pastoral interview.

The key is asking the right questions and then genuinely listening to the answers. Not "How are you?" (which produces reflexive answers) but "How are you really doing?" Not "What's new?" but "What's been occupying your thoughts most this week?" Not "Are you enjoying the sermon series?" but "What is God speaking to you about right now?" These questions signal that you are interested in the person's actual inner life, not just their surface presentation.

## Leading the Flock to Good Pasture: Spiritual Provision

The shepherd's primary responsibility is provision -- leading the sheep to the green pasture and still water that sustain their lives (Psalm 23). Pastorally, this provision happens through the teaching ministry, through the worship life of the congregation, through the sacraments, through the small group community, and through the overall spiritual culture of the congregation. The question the pastor must regularly ask is not merely "Are people attending?" but "Are people growing?" Not "Is the program running?" but "Are people being nourished?"

A congregation can be active and busy without being spiritually fed. The calendar can be full of events while the spiritual pantry is bare. The pastor who confuses activity with nourishment will produce an exhausted congregation that is professionally religious but spiritually thin. The pastor who regularly steps back from the busyness to ask "What are we producing?" -- not just what are we doing -- will see the patterns that need to change.

## Assessing the Spiritual Temperature

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There are several indicators a pastor can use to assess the spiritual health of his congregation beyond attendance and giving. Are people sharing stories of how God is at work in their lives? Is there a culture of genuine honesty and vulnerability, or is the congregation a performance culture where everyone presents their best face? Are marriages healthy? Are people growing in generosity? Are new people coming to faith? Is the congregation capable of forgiveness when conflict arises, or does conflict tend to escalate into division? Are people willing to serve in unglamorous, unrecognized ways, or is service largely driven by public recognition?

These indicators do not produce a numerical score, but they paint a picture. The pastor who is attentive to these patterns will be able to identify both the genuine health of the congregation and the specific areas that need pastoral attention and prayer. This attentiveness is itself an act of shepherding -- it is the watchfulness that protects the flock from the slow diseases that are far more common threats than sudden catastrophe.



# Protecting the Flock: Vigilance and Discernment

In Acts 20:28-31, Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders contains one of the most urgent pastoral charges in the New Testament: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert."

The pastoral responsibility for protection is not paranoia -- it is discernment. The good shepherd distinguishes between the genuine predators that threaten the flock and the ordinary conflicts and difficulties that are part of normal congregational life. Not every difficult person is a wolf; not every theological disagreement is a false teaching crisis; not every conflict is a divisive spirit. The pastor who treats every challenge as an existential threat will create an anxious, defensive community that loses its capacity for genuine love and hospitality. The pastor who treats no challenge as a serious threat will eventually lose the flock to predators he refused to see.

## False Teaching and Theological Drift

The most common form of congregational threat is not the charismatic external wolf but the slow theological drift that happens when the congregation is not consistently formed by the full counsel of Scripture. Churches that shift gradually from Gospel-centered to moralistic, from theologically robust to spiritually vague, from cross-shaped to comfort-seeking, do not usually experience a dramatic moment of apostasy. They drift, sermon by sermon, year by year, into a religion of their own design. The pastor's best protection against this drift is consistent, deep, doctrinally serious preaching of the whole Bible.

When specific false teaching does arise -- whether from a book series making the rounds, a podcaster gaining influence in the congregation, or a member teaching Sunday school from a heterodox perspective -- the pastor must address it. Not with paranoid accusation, not with theological bullying, not with the kind of heresy-hunting that sees enemies under every rock. But with clear, patient, gracious doctrinal correction. The congregation that has been formed in sound doctrine is much better equipped to recognize and resist false teaching than the congregation that has received only spiritual inspiration without theological formation.

## Divisive Persons and Relational Predators

Paul warns Titus about "divisive" people (Titus 3:10) and instructs him to "warn them once, then warn them a second time, and after that have nothing to do with them." This is a pastoral category that every pastor eventually encounters: the person who is not heretical but whose patterns of behavior -- triangulation, gossip, manipulation, factionalism, inappropriate demands on leadership -- are consistently destructive to congregational community. These people require a different kind of pastoral response than false teachers, but they are equally serious threats to the health of the congregation.

The pastor who refuses to address divisive behavior out of a misguided commitment to avoiding conflict is not being pastoral -- he is being complicit. Genuine pastoral care for the flock sometimes requires direct, gracious, but firm engagement with people whose patterns of behavior are causing harm. This conversation is best done with a witness present, with specific behavioral observations rather than character indictments, with a clear description of the change being asked for, and with genuine pastoral love for the person even as their behavior is addressed.

## Seeking the Lost: Pastoral Care for the Straying

Jesus's parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) is a pastoral charge embedded in a theological argument. The Pharisees had complained that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. His response was not an apology but a parable: what shepherd, having a hundred sheep and losing one, would not leave the ninety-nine to find the one? And when he finds it, he rejoices more over that one than over the ninety-nine. This is not good organizational management -- it is the logic of divine love, and it is the standard Jesus sets for every pastor.

The pastor who notices absence and pursues it pastorally is doing something profoundly countercultural in an era of consumer religion. People expect to be able to drift in and out of congregational life without being noticed, without being pursued, without anyone caring enough to ask what happened. The pastor who does notice, who does care, and who reaches out specifically and personally -- not with a form letter from the church office but with a genuine pastoral contact -- will often discover that the person who drifted was waiting to be found.

### **Building a Pastoral Care System**

In any congregation, the lead pastor cannot personally attend to every pastoral need. He needs a system -- a structured approach to pastoral care that extends the congregation's capacity for care beyond what any single person can provide. This system typically involves multiple layers: the lead pastor handling the most serious crises and maintaining ongoing pastoral relationships with key leaders; staff pastors and pastoral care deacons carrying the broader pastoral care load; small group leaders providing first-level pastoral connection and flagging needs to the pastoral team; and trained lay caregivers who can provide support with hospital meals, practical assistance, listening, and prayer.

The key to a healthy pastoral care system is not its organizational complexity but its relational quality. Pastoral care is not a service delivery system. It is a community of people who genuinely love one another and who have developed enough theological formation and relational skill to provide meaningful care in a wide range of situations. Building this community -- through training, through modeling, through ongoing pastoral formation of the care team -- is one of the pastor's most important structural investments.

### **The Crucible of Long-Term Pastoral Relationships**

One of the most distinctive and most valuable features of the pastoral role is its longevity. Unlike a therapist who sees a client for a defined period, unlike a consultant who addresses a specific problem and moves on, the pastor has the extraordinary opportunity to walk with people through multiple life stages: young adulthood, marriage, the birth of children, the crises of middle age, the losses and wisdom of later life, and finally death. This long-term accompaniment produces a quality of pastoral relationship that is simply not available in any other form of helping relationship.

The pastor who stays long enough to baptize children he later marries, to bury parents whose children he disciplined, to watch a congregation form and mature and pass leadership to the next generation -- this pastor has a kind of pastoral wisdom that cannot be acquired in any other way. It is the wisdom of someone who has watched enough lives unfold to understand the patterns of spiritual development, the recurrence of human weakness, the faithfulness of God over decades, and the particular grace that comes to people who have been faithfully shepherded through the full range of their lives.

### **Reflection Questions for the Pastoral Shepherd**

(continued)

1. Who in your congregation do you know most intimately -- not just their names and faces, but their actual spiritual condition, their deepest fears, their most pressing needs? What percentage of your congregation could you describe at that level?
2. When did you last make an unexpected pastoral contact with a congregant -- not because they asked for one, but because you sensed they needed one? What happened?
3. Are there divisive or destructive patterns of behavior in your congregation that you have been avoiding addressing? What has held you back? What would it cost the community to continue avoiding them?
4. Who has drifted from your congregation in the past year? Have you pursued them pastorally? What happened, or what has prevented you from pursuing them?
5. What is the spiritual temperature of your congregation right now? Not the attendance, the giving, the program quality -- but the actual spiritual condition of the people. What does your honest assessment reveal?

*The congregation is not your audience, your platform, or your institution. It is a flock of real, vulnerable, eternal souls entrusted to your care by a God who purchased them with his own blood. They deserve a shepherd who knows them by name, who prays for them in secret, who notices when they are missing, who faces down the threats that come for them, and who walks with them through every valley. That shepherd is you. And you are not alone in it.*

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