

Sheep, Love Your Shepherds as Yourselves!

On the Mutual Responsibilities of Pastors and Parishioners

Reflections Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life 11 August 2017

Psalm 23:1,4,5 (quoted)

Matthew 7:13-14 (quoted)

Ephesians 6:6 (quoted)

Let me begin with an honest confession: I have, at times, been unduly critical of pastors. Whether such criticism can be justified is not the point here; the real question is why we fail to apply, in our own conduct towards them, the very teachings of Jesus, our good Shepherd, that pastors preach to us. Generally speaking, parishioners appreciate the roles pastors perform in their churches and communities. This includes preaching and teaching Christian doctrine; performing rites of passage, such as infant dedications, baptisms, weddings and funerals; pastoral care, such as visitation, counselling, comforting and praying for people; and administration, such as chairing meetings, developing inreach and outreach programmes for the church and community, and representing the church to the community. But despite the roles pastors perform, they are not spared criticism from their parishioners. Some of this criticism may be constructive, and some destructive.

But pastors need not be discouraged, because Jesus too faced severe criticism, so much so that they eventually nailed Him to a cross. Moreover, if parishioners remain silent, how will a pastor know how well he is discharging his spiritual responsibilities?

When we think about shepherds and sheep, what comes to mind is Psalm 23 of David. This psalm is probably the best-known passage of the Old Testament that speaks of the shepherd-sheep relationship. It is a testimony by David to the Lord's faithfulness throughout his life. As a hymn of confidence, it pictures the Lord as the disciple's shepherd, king and host. David, using images common to the ancient Near East, progressively reveals his personal relationship with the Lord in three steps: his affirmation, "The LORD is my shepherd"; his expectation, "I will fear no evil"; and his joy, "my cup runneth over" (Psalm 23:1, 4, 5). Pastors who understand these and act accordingly will never face criticism from their parishioners. Though these three requirements may seem simple, only those pastors who are fully committed to Christ can become such shepherds.

Pastors fail to reach such an ideal because of several common causes: when they fail to fulfil the responsibilities of pastoral leadership; when they attempt to introduce changes for the sake of change, without seeking the views of the parish; when they breach pastoral ethics; when

they remain too long in one place, so that the congregation yearns for variety in its spiritual learning; when there are many unresolved issues; and when the congregation expects the pastor to live above reproach. I do not intend to elaborate on these points, nor am I equipped to offer advice to pastors. But allow me to quote Jesus: *"Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it"* (Matthew 7:13-14). Pastors, walk the difficult path, and your reward will be great.

I am aware that some ordained ministers, and some faithful Christians, will be reading this. I do not want readers to conclude that I am taking the side of the pastors and setting the sheep free to do as they please.

Parishioners should understand very clearly that pastors, outside their cassocks, are ordinary people like you and me. They are as fallible as we are. If the rules of forgiveness, concern and support apply to us, they apply to pastors too. Parishioners seldom give pastors emotional support, because it seems like an inappropriate role reversal. That is not true: we can provide immense emotional support in many ways. Yes, there will still be some who are critical of those who provide such support to pastors. Ignore them; they will come round eventually. But when you offer such support, do it without expecting reciprocity. As Paul writes, we are not to act "as menpleasers" (Ephesians 6:6).

The other common cause of criticism of a pastor is rooted in transference, the psychological phenomenon in which the pastor is subconsciously perceived as a parental figure. This means that unresolved emotional issues from childhood come to be placed at the pastor's door. If people felt neglected by their parents, teachers or friends, they will tend to feel neglected by their pastors. If people felt rejected by their parents, they will be quick to see "rejection" in the pastor. Criticism inevitably follows.

Another factor very prominent in our times is that we tend to outsource our responsibilities to the pastors. When people are critical of the financial support pastors receive, it simply means that we consider pastors "paid servants," which they are not. What we fail to understand is that when we "outsource" our spiritual responsibilities to pastors, we become part-time Christians, or Sunday Christians. Pastors are pastors primarily because they have received the call to be one. They come to serve the Lord.

Many a church has fallen into disarray because of disharmony between parishioners and pastors. While there are several conflict-resolution mechanisms set up within mainline churches, these should be the last resort. The primary aim should be to develop mutual respect, trust and love. May Jesus help us maintain harmony in our churches.

Amen.

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