

Pastoring With Less Pain, Part 2

by David Servant

Pastors can experience less pain and stress and more fruitfulness and joy by structuring their churches biblically and focusing on disciple-making.

Scripture: Matthew 18:20, Acts 20:35, Romans 16:5, Ephesians 4:12, 1 Timothy 3:1

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Discipleship"

Description

David Servant preaches about the challenges pastors face in dealing with church members, emphasizing the importance of pastoring genuine sheep who are willing to be discipled and follow Jesus. He encourages pastors to purge their churches of 'goats' by preaching the truth and, if necessary, practicing biblical excommunication. David highlights the discrepancy between contemporary church structures and what Jesus intended for His church, urging pastors to consider restructuring their churches biblically to alleviate stress and burnout among pastors.

Transcript

When pastors gather, they sometimes joke that if it weren't for people, pastoring would be a great profession. Indeed, people are the reason that pastoring is sometimes so painful. However, as I contended in June's E-teaching, Pastoring with Less Pain, Part 1 of 2, if you are a sincere disciple-making pastor, then you know that pastoring genuine sheep---those who want to be discipled and truly follow Jesus---is an absolute delight. Thus I did my best to encourage pastors to purge their churches of goats by preaching the truth. And if that doesn't clear them all out, then biblical excommunication is in order. (And excommunication is biblical, of course.)

Most pastors, however, find the idea of excommunication to be a frightful proposition, and understandably so. Can you imagine what would happen in most churches if the pastor excommunicated someone, even attempting to do it quietly? Most likely it would result in gossip, strife, and a potential church split. If the pastor publicly explained his reason for the excommunication, he could well be accused of being insensitive, dictatorial, or face a lawsuit for defamation of character. Even though Jesus gave very clear instructions to all His followers regarding excommunication and shunning---instructions that are reinforced in the New Testament epistles---actually following those instructions seems like a way to open Pandora's Box.

So did Jesus fail to think through His instructions regarding church discipline, not foreseeing all the potential problems?

The answer, in my humble opinion, is that contemporary church structure is so far removed from what Jesus intended, that it robs us of much of what the New Testament tells us Christianity is supposed to be. We can't obey Jesus' clear instructions regarding so many things, and we miss out on so many blessings, because the basic church structure that exists works against what Jesus' intended. To say it more plainly, typical contemporary church structure, which is actually derived, not from the New Testament, but from pagan and Roman Catholic tradition that goes back as much as 1,800 years, works against Jesus' intention that disciples be made in every ethnic group of the world. Not only that, but typical contemporary church structure is a proven, sure-fire, pastor killer.

My preliminary point is this: Pastor, if you want to pastor with less pain (not to mention lead a church the way Jesus, the One before whom you must stand one day to give an account, intended), you need to structure your church biblically. Jesus is supposed to be the Head of His Church, right? Doesn't that mean we are supposed to carefully be doing everything His way? Didn't Jesus rebuke religious leaders in His day who "exalted their traditions above the Word of God"? If we continue following traditions of church structure that contradict God's Word, how are we any different than those whom Jesus rebuked? Do we really think we can be more fruitful following man's traditions and ignoring God's revealed plan?

Dear pastor, you can, of course, continue on your present pastor-killing course. You might even make it to retirement. Many, of course, don't make it to retirement. The pastoral highway is littered with rusting wrecks along its berms. I've noticed that many pastors who do survive a decade or two are men with rhino skins and deep, old wounds. These precious men break my heart when I'm with them. Their wives and children are often even more scarred than they are. Many of their children, having witnessed the dark side of the ministry, are cynics who have abandoned the faith permanently. Together they are the casualties, sacrificed for the sake of a system that is not worth the sacrifice.

Shocking Stats

You may think I'm exaggerating the problem, but one survey revealed that 70% of pastors are so stressed and burned out that they regularly consider leaving the ministry. In one survey of over 1,000 evangelical pastors, 89% said they have considered leaving the ministry. 56% said they would leave the ministry if they could find a better vocation! 71% stated they were burned out, and they battle depression and fatigue on a weekly or even daily basis.

Another survey showed that across the U.S., fifteen hundred pastors leave the ministry each month due to moral failure, spiritual burnout, or contention in their churches. Eighty percent of seminary and Bible School graduates who enter ministry will leave the ministry within the first five years. Seventy percent of pastors constantly fight depression. One out of three pastors state that being in the ministry is hazardous for their families. (For sources and more stats, see <http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/default.asp?articleid=36562&columnid=3958> .)

The solutions that are often prescribed for these common problems---such as better seminary training, more personal Bible study time, or more visits to pastoral retreat centers---are often nothing more than band-aids that offer no lasting remedy. The source of all these problems is unbiblical contemporary church structure and the unbiblical role that is expected of modern pastors. Dear pastor, you've inherited an endless man-made mess when you could be enjoying a God-blessed fruitful rest! The question is, are you willing to give up pain that Jesus never intended for you to suffer in order to gain a blessing that He intended for you to enjoy? (Sounds like a no-brainer, doesn't it? Better keep reading though...)

The Biblical Church Structure and Pastoral Role

There are so many obvious differences between the church of the New Testament and most modern evangelical churches that a book could be written on the subject. So I'll just try to cover a few of the fundamental differences.

First and foremost, the New Testament church was focused on disciple-making, that is, (1) preaching a gospel that called people to repentance and a genuine faith in Jesus, validated by a heart commitment to obey Him, and (2) teaching true believers on a personal/relational basis---by precept and even more so by example---to obey all of Christ's commandments.

Contrasted with that in the modern church is a gospel that asks people to "accept Jesus as their Savior," an unbiblical idea, which results in false, deceived converts who have no intention of denying themselves and taking up their crosses daily. They have not reached even the first step in God's Kingdom. And the few who actually are born again among their ranks are never personally discipled. Rather, they only attend weekly shows to listen to endless sermons (many of which lead them away from the truth, not into it). They have no one who discipled them personally, no deep relationships with other believers, and they have no idea how their pastor is living his life as they only see him in the pulpit on Sundays, thus they cannot be taught or influenced by his example. In short, there is very little, if any, discipleship.

When Jesus told His apostles to go and make disciples, Peter did not turn to John and say, "I think I know what He is telling us to do! He wants us to build auditoriums and hold meetings where people can come for an hour each week (for the rest of their lives), sit in long benches, and we can try to come up with interesting and relevant sermons that will keep them coming back week after week!"

No, when Jesus told His apostles to go and make disciples, they realized that He wanted them to do with others what He had been doing with them for the past three years---personal, relational, daily discipleship, by precept and example. Disciples are made, not by weekly sermons, but relationally. That is why, of the sixteen requirements for overseers (the same office as pastors and elders) that Paul listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, only one has anything to do with their ability to teach vocally, while the other fifteen are all about their character. The biblical pastor teaches primarily by means of his example to a few, not by means of entertaining sermons to many. Yet contrast the sixteen requirements for pastors/elders listed in 1 Timothy 3 with the average requirements for pastors that most pastoral search committees are seeking. ("Must have excellent preaching skills with a dynamic personality, and possess at minimum an M. Div.") That comparison reveals what is wrong with so many of today's churches.

Because it is possible to disciple only a few at a time, the biblical church is small enough to meet in a house, and consists of two to twenty people, because a disciple-making pastor cannot relationally disciple more people than that. Probably everyone who is reading this article knows that there isn't a single mention of a church building within the book of Acts---a record of several decades of early church history---and they also know that the early churches all met in houses (see Acts 2:2, 46; 5:42; 8:3; 12:12; 16:40; 20:20; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 1:2; 2 John 1:10).

Probably they also know, if they have ever read 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, that early church gatherings were participatory, as every member was gifted by the Holy Spirit for the common edification, and that a teaching, exhortation or prophecy might be brought by anyone, not just a pastor/elder/overseer. The idea of the pastor giving a weekly sermon to a gathered group who passively listen while all seated auditorium-style is foreign to the New Testament. The pastor's role was one of servant to everyone,

setting a servant's example, existing to "equip the saints for the work of service" (Eph. 4:12), not just in theory but in practical reality. Of course, the only way to do that is to give the saints something to do, just as Jesus did when He made disciples.

The biblical pastor is not "the great gifted one" who takes center stage and performs all the ministry. Rather, he is a servant among servants, and he finds great joy in helping those under his care grow spiritually, discover their gifts, and serve others. The infrequency of which Paul, Peter, John, James and Jude address words to or mention pastors/elders/overseers in their letters to the churches is an amazing revelation of New Testament church structure and the biblical role of pastors. They didn't play the prominent role in the New Testament church that they do in most modern churches. And because of that, they didn't rob others in the body of Christ from realizing their God-given roles. Truly, every member of the body had a function in the body. It was a reality, not just a theory.

When Jesus envisioned His church, He envisioned small groups, which is why He said, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matt. 18:20). The phrase, "gathered together in Jesus' name," would indicate, at bare minimum, an intended spiritual gathering of Christian believers. Thus Jesus envisioned intentional spiritual gatherings of a few people, even as few as two or three. And that should not surprise us, since He intended that we make disciples, and the model He gave for disciple-making was relational.

Imagine if Jesus had tried to succeed at His disciple-making mission by following the example of the modern church. Imagine Him meeting for an hour or two once a week with Peter, James and John. Imagine Him leading them in twenty minutes of praise and worship, taking up an offering, preaching a sermon, and then standing at the back door to thank them for their attendance as they filed out of His special building! Would Jesus have succeeded? Clearly not. Then what ever makes us think that we can succeed at making disciples by following a pattern that, had Jesus followed it, would have guaranteed His failure?

Returning to an earlier topic in this e-teaching---excommunication from the church of the unrepentant---we can easily understand how Jesus' instructions will only work in the church as He envisioned it. Jesus did not envision large churches where strangers gather weekly to watch the "clergy" perform, using their gifts. He envisioned close-knit little families of holy followers of Christ, brothers and sisters who knew, loved and cared for each other, who naturally held each other accountable by their closeness. If there was a rift between two due to an offense by one, they were to work it out between themselves. If unsuccessful, they were to gather two or three others from their little church who knew and loved them both and who would help them reconcile. If the offender still refused to repent, they were to take it before "the entire church"---not a congregation of three-hundred or three-thousand people---but before the little house group that knew and loved both the offender and the offended. If the offender still refused to repent at the urging of the consensus, he was to be excommunicated, exposed as a false convert among true believers, and who would misrepresent Christ and true Christians before an onlooking world if he were allowed to remain within the fellowship. Thus the holy church of God preserved its purity in everyone's sight.

An Objection or Two

Perhaps the most common objection I hear from pastors to what I'm describing is not, "That isn't biblical!," because it is undeniably biblical. Rather, the most common objection is, "How will I make my living if my church only consists of fifteen people?" Perhaps this objection reveals what is truly wrong! Jesus did not

die to provide an income for pastors.

The truth is that there is some biblical evidence that, because pastoring a house church does not require one's full time, pastors naturally have time to earn their living by other means. Remember that when Paul gathered the elders/pastors/overseers from Ephesus, he said to them,

You yourselves know that these [my own] hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35-36).

Honestly, pastors are some of the most talented people I know. They are often very hard-working, have great organizational and people skills, are good communicators and honest, smart people. I'm sure that many would be extremely successful in other employment or business. Many would end up making millions of dollars with which they could use to be a blessing, all while effectively pastoring/discipling a few true sheep---who would actually grow spiritually. In doing so, such pastors would ultimately be much more fruitful than if they had devoted all their years to trying to keep a big herd of goats entertained and happy while killing themselves in the process.

Of course, there is also support in Scripture for pastors deriving their living from their ministry. If a pastor's ministry requires his full time, then he should derive his full support from it. One small church of ten income-earners who all tithe can support a pastor at their average standard of living. House churches have no overhead expenses.

Another objection I've heard from pastors is that people are culturally inclined to only attend church in actual church buildings. They can't accept the idea of a church meeting in a home.

The answer to that objection is that true sheep, once enlightened to the biblical truth, can overcome their cultural bias. It is goats, religious goats, who can't overcome that bias. You don't need them (see June's e-teaching, *Pastoring with Less Pain*, Part 1 of 2). True sheep love to get together with other true sheep and talk about what the Lord is doing in their lives. Chances are, if you have any of those in your church, they're already doing it on a regular basis. They're having church and don't know it. And if they're honest, they'll tell you that they enjoy such spiritual participatory fellowship a lot more than passively observing a church service. Incidentally, according to pollster George Barna, there are millions of such people, and they're leaving churches in droves---for good.

If you dare, I encourage you to read *Pagan Christianity* by Frank Viola, a thorough investigation into the pagan historical origins of so much of what is part and parcel of modern evangelical Christianity. It was recently published by Tyndale with a forward by George Barna. A real eye-opener.

I know of some pastors who have taken the leap out of goat herding to follow the biblical pattern of pastoring/discipling sheep. One of them is Chuck King, who is an associate minister with Heaven's Family. Chuck was a traditional pastor for twenty-eight years, and was very successful by the usual standards. Today, however, he oversees two house churches, and those two house churches fully pay his modest salary. Pastoring does not require his full time, and so Chuck will minister overseas this year in India, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, China, Ukraine, Myanmar, and Pakistan, bearing tons of fruit. Because he has made disciples, his churches do just fine even when he is away. By supporting Chuck, those two house churches are also bearing tons of fruit around the world.

Another such pastor is Teryl Hebert of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Like me, Teryl spent decades as a pastor scratching his head, wondering what was wrong with the picture. But God opened his eyes to the tradition and the truth. He ultimately apologized to his flock for robbing them of ministry and fruit that God ordained for them to enjoy. He then divided up his congregation into ten house churches overseen by pastors/elders/overseers who met the biblical requirements. He focuses now on serving those pastors. They've sold a few of their church buildings (and are trying to sell the one that remains) and now have many times more to give to missions and the poor (which, incidentally, was how New Testament churches spent their money, something else that can't be done today because of unbiblical church structure). Teryl uses his many talents to develop real estate in his spare time, making a good living, and he travels internationally to teach other pastors what took him thirty years to learn. Thus his personal fruitfulness has increased exponentially.

Teryl has described the traditional way as a "Pyramid Church," where the pastor sits on the top, while everyone under him exists to help him fulfill his vision and calling, serving him. And the bigger the base of the pyramid grows, the higher the pastor is elevated in his kingdom. So the pastor's goal is to get more people under him. But the biblical model is a pyramid that is upside down, with the pastor at the bottom. His goal is to serve the few closest to him, helping them to follow Jesus and fulfill their God-given ministries. As his disciples make disciples who make disciples, the upside down pyramid gets larger, and God's kingdom grows for His glory.

So let me ask it again: Pastor, do you want to continue in an endless man-made mess or enjoy a God-blessed fruitful rest? Are you willing to give up pain that Jesus never intended for you to suffer in order to gain a blessing that He intended for you to enjoy?

I realize, of course, that those minority of pastors who have substantially insulated themselves from most pastoral pains will be content to stay with what they've got. And there are many pastors who realize that changing the structure of their current churches would be impossible, as they have a herd of goats, none of whom are the least bit interested in being involved in anything that resembles biblical Christianity. But please don't forget this article, as we all know how quickly churches can turn sour---and how often churches change pastors and pastors change churches. There might soon be a window of opportunity for you to enjoy more lasting joy by following a more biblical model of pastoring.

And before you make your leap, give Chuck King and Teryl Hebert a call for their advice. I can provide you with their phone numbers.

As always, I welcome your feedback. I read it all, even though I can't always reply for lack of time. ---
David

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