

Shepherding Your Shepherd

Acts 14:15 (HCSB)

...We are men also, with the same nature as you, and we are proclaiming good news to you...

After serving as a pastor of a local congregation for 16 years, the whole direction of my ministry changed when I began to ask one simple question: “Who encourages the encourager?” Have you ever thought about that? Who takes care of the person who is taking care of everyone else? Haven’t we always heard that it is the plumber’s pipes that go unfixed because everyone else needs theirs done?

Are you shepherding your shepherd? Churches have a collective responsibility to care for the person who cares for them. That begins by putting yourself in the shoes of a typical pastor.

H.B. London with Focus on the Family has written, “Four words characterize how pastors feel: isolation, loneliness, insecurity, and inadequacy.” 35% of all current pastors have been forced out or fired from ministry at least once. 70% feel inadequately trained to cope with ministry demands. 95% believe that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively.

Because of some of these issues, pastors tend to leave churches sooner than what is helpful. High pastoral turnover results in congregations struggling and often floundering. Research indicates that it takes years for pastors to reach their maximum effectiveness in a congregation, usually six or seven, but pastors frequently don’t stay that long. When you factor in other studies which maintain that it takes five years for a pastor to earn a congregation’s trust, you can see how shepherding your shepherd in a purely pragmatic sense benefits your church as a whole.

However, rather than shepherding our pastor, we sometimes put him on a pedestal. There is something in human nature that tends toward idolatry, as evidenced in the popular TV show *American Idol*. We make idols of our performers and they become the object of our adoration. We want to know all of the details of their lives. This can creep over into the church and into pastoral ministry.

In the Old Testament, God’s people had a pattern of desiring a physical manifestation of His person, a God they could see and touch. Even though God raised strong leaders up, known as “judges,” for the people, they clamored for a king like the rest of the nations had. It wasn’t enough for God to lead them.

These tendencies still plague us today. Pastors are sometimes afforded god-like status. The typical parishioner would probably deny this, but the behavior of some demonstrates a misplaced sense of dependence on a pastor. Why else would they become so upset when a pastor doesn’t live up to their expectations? Why else would they leave their church and sometimes their faith when a pastor’s moral failures are exposed?

In Acts 14:8 we read how God used Paul in the life of a man who had a physical liability. Paul sensed that God was at work in this man’s life and so he simply invited him to do what he needed to do. The man, lame from birth, experienced a miraculous healing. The response of the citizens was one of worship and

idolatry. At first, Paul and Barnabas didn't understand what was going on because a native tongue was being spoken. Eventually though they realized and immediately challenged this adoration.

Acts 14:15 records Paul's plea that "... We are men also, with the same nature as you, and we are proclaiming good news to you..." He is saying, "We're just like you AND we're letting God use us." It is as if many people cannot hold both of those beliefs, that someone just like me might be the person God uses to change my life.

Pastors are human, just like you are. Perhaps we should revisit the Golden Rule as a guide for how we shepherd our shepherds. Do you like to eat dinner uninterrupted? Do you like to leave your work at the office? Do you like to take a vacation without everyone knowing where you're going? Do you like everyone in town to know all of your personal business, like when you buy a new car? Do you like for other people to comment on the behavior of your children, especially when they're acting like kids do sometimes? And, finally, would you like to be put up on a pedestal and to essentially live in a glass house?

Pedestals are for plants, not for pastors. Someone has said that putting a pastor on a pedestal keeps them from actually being a pastor. Christ is the One we should put on a pedestal, the Chief Shepherd, not the under-shepherd, our pastor. He is the One who will never disappoint us and will always meet our needs.

While sometimes pastors are idolized, they are also demonized at times. Pedestals are by nature a little unstable. In Acts 14, in the town of Lystra, Paul went from being worshipped to being attacked and stoned. We have our own form of stoning today called criticism and judgment. We use words and glances, both verbal and non-verbal communication.

At times a church member may not agree with how a pastor leads the church and feels that a particular direction or decision is not the correct one. However these disagreements are not the problem but rather how we handle them. Fortunately, the New Testament provides for us a grievance resolution process based on Matthew 5:23-24 and 18:15-19. Rather than talking about a pastor, we should talk to him. Every church member can help their pastor by encouraging those with complaints to follow the process.

Even after his difficulty in Lystra, Paul continued his missionary journey, leading people to Christ and developing them as followers of Christ. Later in Acts 14, Paul established other leaders and his example shows us how we should respond to our own leaders. After helping the churches find pastors, he prayed, fasted, and committed them to the Lord.

It may be that this will be more difficult than you imagine. Committing anything to Christ requires yielding control. Perhaps God is saying to you, "Only I should be on that pedestal of adoration. Your expectations of your pastor are unrealistic. Only I can be everything to you. Stop demanding that your pastor always be there for you and instead trust in My constant care for you."

Putting my pastor in God's hands means that I release him to do what God wants him to do which, according to Ephesians 4:12, is to equip God's people to do ministry together as a team. This involves your acceptance of your own calling as well. God calls every church member to ministry. Sometimes we talk about being called to "full-time ministry" as if God would accept anything less than 100%. Some pastors serve Christ vocationally, others bivocationally, but we are all called to serve Christ and the world all of the time.

I hope that you'll do kind things for your pastor. I hope that you will honor him during October, which is Pastor Appreciation Month. I hope that you'll remember his birthday and those of his family. I hope you'll acknowledge his anniversaries with gestures of affection. All of these things are ways to encourage the encourager and to serve the servant. But the best thing you can do for your pastor is be sold out to the mission of this church and to fulfill the calling God has placed on your life. That is really how you can shepherd your shepherd.

Sources:

Preventing Ministry Failure, Michael Todd Wilson and Brad Hoffmann

How To Keep The Pastor You Love, Jane Rubietta