

Pastors Are Human

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The esteem that Americans hold for their pastors has hit an all-time low. According to a Gallup poll examining who we regard as the most honest and ethical person in our lives, only 47% of Americans rated clergy highly on honesty and ethics, placing them seventh on a list of twenty-two professions (with nurses leading the way at 82%). The poll taken in December marked the first time clergy had dropped below 50%, significantly lower than the 67% trust level recorded in 1985.

What's gone wrong? I remember when as a teen I jokingly referred to our pastor as "Pistol Pete." The words had barely left my mouth when I received a tongue lashing from my mother who let me know in no uncertain terms that there would be zero tolerance for any form of disrespect toward a man called by God to lead His church. I was to refer to him as Pastor Peterson, and if I knew what was good for me I would honor the man in the position.

But something's happened causing us to notice that the pastors we once unquestioningly placed on pedestals may have faults. Whether the blame falls on the televangelist debacles of the 80s, multiple moral scandals that followed, or our common distrust of all public figures, we are painfully aware that our pastors are only human—men with feet of clay, susceptible to crumble under the same temptations of the flesh afflicting us all.

Should that surprise us? Even the Bible presents God's servants as persons with human frailties. Our childhood Sunday School lessons show the super-hero side of Noah, Gideon, David and other great men and women in the Bible. We are in awe of their prowess, their lives and their faith. There is nothing wrong with presenting them in this way; it is always appropriate to introduce great biblical and historical figures by their acts of bravery and trust in God.

Yet as we dig deeper in our study of the Scriptures we begin to discover—with the exception of Jesus Christ—the seamy side of our Bible heroes. Though they served God gallantly, they were humans who struggled to demonstrate a consistent walk with God. We learn that their victories were achieved solely by the grace of God and despite faltering human faith. The life stories of these heroes testify that “we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7).

So it is with pastors. Christ has entrusted the care of His flock into the hands of very human people. God could have created a new order of other-worldly angelic beings to equip the Church for ministry. But instead He chose real people to live and walk the life of faith among us. The pastor is one of us, growing and being built up along with the rest of the Body of Christ.

All In

The pastor is a fellow traveler and learner among us. Though he may come to ministry following years of study, with great knowledge of the Bible, and skills in preaching and ministry, he does not come as a perfect package. Christ gave pastors to the Church so that the Body would be built up “until we all come to unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the full measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). The pastor is included in the “all.”

Since the “job” of our pastors is to encourage and guide us through this maturing process, how do we as members of the Body of Christ come alongside them in this process? Here are some suggestions drawn from my years as a pastor and from the experiences ministering with these men God has given as gifts to our churches:

Encourage your pastor's spiritual growth

A survey of 1,050 pastors indicated only 26% regularly had personal devotions and felt they were adequately fed spiritually. Though this may seem shocking, it shouldn't be surprising when 90% indicated they were frequently fatigued or worn out from the many responsibilities and constant pressures of ministry. A man who is giving and giving without opportunity to be fed personally will quickly become a weary, spiritually dry pastor who is unprepared for the spiritual battles that come his way.

We see examples in the life of the Lord Jesus in which He pulled away from the demands of heavy ministry to rest and pray. He encouraged His disciples to do the same. Communion with the Father was important to Jesus, so He made it a priority to continually carve out time to find spiritual refreshment. Our pastors need this all the more.

The church can be proactive in providing opportunities for the pastor to find spiritual refreshment. A monthly personal retreat day would allow him to step away from the routine and demands of ministry for extended time alone with the Lord. Encourage him to make this a priority, dedicating a full day of his work schedule each month to pull away from the demands of ministry for his own personal spiritual nourishment.

Show him that his family is important

It's not always easy to find the right balance between being a good dad and shepherding a congregation. Since the pastor works weekends and often has a Bible study, meeting or counseling sessions in the evening, he needs to be creative in finding time to spend with his school-age children. He knows that if he doesn't get the balance right, it could hurt his ministry or – even worse – his children may grow up resenting church.

Our family was blessed by churches which saw my family as part of their ministry. Our four children knew they were valued by people who were interested in their young lives, and I was made aware that my family was a priority. When our oldest daughter played high school basketball and had a couple of Wednesday games on the schedule, the board chairman let me know I was expected to be at the games; someone else could lead Bible study those nights. What a gift!

Understand his hurts and grief

When Jesus stood before the tomb of Lazarus and wept, those who witnessed it commented, "See how He loved him!" I cannot count the times I have heard a pastor heave a deep sigh, or have a crack in his weak voice, or fight back tears when speaking of a church member who has passed away; or when a family broke up after months of counseling; or when someone has left the church in a huff. In my heart I say, "See how he loves them!"

When a pastor begins to pour his life into a congregation, he cannot escape without being touched by sorrow and loss. Six funerals in a three-week period breaks his heart. Feeling helpless to save a marriage or rescue a wayward teen burdens his shoulders. Attacks by critics and silence from those who might defend him—crush the spirit. He loves the flock God has entrusted to him; anything that disrupts their peace troubles his soul.

We would do well to remember this aspect of the pastor's humanity and minister to him during times of hurt and grief. Paul encouraged believers to "join me in my struggle by praying to God for me" (Rom 15:30). I would encourage us to go a step beyond; not praying for the pastor, but also coming alongside to pray with him.

Love him in his weaknesses

As a result of his humanity, it is guaranteed that your pastor will make

mistakes. There will be stressful board meetings when he reacts in the flesh, displaying a temperament he himself will regret. His tongue may do him harm and wound you with a thoughtless comment or hurtful opinion. He will know that damage has been done, yet will have no power to erase what has happened. Love your pastor. Show him grace.

It is quite probable that Paul is considering the human weaknesses of church leaders when he commands the Church to “esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake” (1 Thes 5:13). The Greek word he uses is *agape*, the same word he uses to describe God’s love to sinners, which was demonstrated through Christ’s gift of forgiving grace. It’s a love that responds to our pastor’s human weaknesses with compassion, “forgiving one another even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:30).

Summary

“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Tm 5:17). Paul is speaking of our pastors; not super-saints perched high on a pedestal, but men called by God and given the tremendous responsibility to “watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (Heb 13:17)



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