

Practical Aspects of Pastoral Theology

By Christopher Cone, General Editor (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2009), 394 pp., (paperback).

Christopher Cone, president of [Tyndale Theological Seminary](#), together with over a dozen other contributors, has published a timely work with the primary aim of helping those in the pastorate to better understand and carry out their God-given role of shepherding the Church:

The Bible gives us our definitions and job descriptions, and we are all the poorer for ignoring its instruction. This present work is an attempt on the part of its many contributors to challenge pastoral students and pastors to better understand and fulfill their Biblical roles. (p. 2)

This comprehensive treatment on what it means to fulfill the Biblical role of an elder/pastor/shepherd touches on a wide array of topics, including: Biblical roles, priorities, measuring success, diversity in the church, gender issues, financial integrity, legal awareness, early challenges, church discipline, counseling, church growth, church planting, teaching and preaching, missions, church polity, and sexual purity.

Probably the best way to convey the value to be found within this volume is to sample an assortment of passages by various contributors which resonated with me when reading the book.

Patrick Belvill in a chapter titled, "A Preacher or a Teacher?" touches on a major problem which has become pandemic within churches today when they confuse the evangelistic mandate of the church body at large with the function of the church meeting which is *equipping and edifying believers*, not *evangelizing unbelievers*. The predictable result is an anemic body of Christ:

Without proper teaching of the word, the disciples remain spiritual children, not exercising their gifts, and not effectively witnessing God's truth to the world. Second, this practice has served to reverse the instruction given in the Bible, for every believer to evangelize, to take their witness out into the world and proclaim it. Instead, many Christians believe their duty is to bring unsaved people to their churches, where can be heard the gospel presented by their pastors. This practice of making every Sunday an evangelistic meeting has robbed the body of its strength to go into the world, and witness one-on-one as we are instructed to do. (p. 37)

This issue is at the heart of the "mile wide and inch deep" Christianity which characterizes our age. It is also the central fallacy of the "seeker friendly" movement which subverts the edification and equipping of believers in favor of

pandering to the culture, in an unwise attempt to make the scandal of the cross palatable to unbelievers.

In a chapter titled, "The Plurality Principle," editor Christopher Cone takes issue with another trend prevalent within our churches: the egotistical/controlling pastor. Rare is the believer who has not sat under such a leader at one time or another in the Christian walk:

[Machiavelli wrote] "a wise prince should devise means whereby his subjects may at all times, whether favourable or adverse, feel the need of the State and of him, and then they will always be faithful to him." This is consistent with a major and common failing on the part of those in church leadership. Rather than inviting church members to maturity in Christ and the *independence* that comes naturally with that increasing maturity . . . church leaders often invite members to become *addicted* to the sugar high of entertainment, programs, and the charisma of a dynamic communicator. Not only does this often-applied approach appeal to the leader's ego, but for Machiavelli it is a way to assure that followers will continue to be faithful to that leader. In other words, *singularity and authority demands methodology that will maintain the continuance of that authority*. . . . The Biblical model is simple indeed. It would appear that mandating a singular or monocratic leadership, or creating a complete distinction between a pastor and an elder or between an overseer and a pastor, represents a shift away from the natural interpretation of Scripture and the simplicity that results, and a shift toward anthropocentric and artificial forms of leadership. (pp. 86, 92, emphasis added)

The problem is one of immature spiritual leadership—sitting under a spiritual leader who is in bondage to his own need for control and exaltation by fostering focus and dependence upon himself. It is often compounded by a congregation which responds to a leadership style like that of a business leader or CEO with a charismatic personality: a "visionary" with "drive" who "achieves success" (most often by manipulating those under his influence).

The self-centered focus of such a spiritual leader is a sure indicator of deep-seated insecurity. Insecurity which will cut off or limit other gifted individuals in the fellowship rather than facilitating the development of their gift—which is often seen as a threat. Additional factors contribute to this unfortunate state of co-dependency within many fellowships: Cone identifies one as the failure to recognize the Scriptural pattern of a *plurality* of elders within *each individual* fellowship. Although many churches represent their leadership as being plural, typically consisting of a single "pastor" with multiple "elders," all too often unbiblical distinctions are made between the pastor and the elders—even though Scripture makes none (pastor = elder = overseer = bishop: they are all *one office*). Thus, the idea of a pastor who is "over" other elders is simply a man-

made distinction which serves, again, to keep the focus on a single individual while the resulting church membership continues to “imprint” on a single pastor rather than receiving teaching and spiritual leadership from all the elders as a group. (We recognized that some elders, due to their greater experience or spiritual depth, may be considered “first among equals” in some matters.)

I believe the present volume could be improved by giving additional attention to two other problems often found within church polity: *authority inversion* and *allowing fiscal limitations to define spiritual leadership*.

Many churches suffer from authority inversion—a situation where the person or persons in spiritual authority within the church are actually under the restrictive control of those they purport to lead. This typically begins when a committee or group within an existing church search for and hire a new “pastor” as their *employee*. The newly found pastor is expected to offer spiritual leadership, until and unless it conflicts with the ideas or family politics of one or more of the hiring committee or “elders.” The result of authority inversion is predictable: the spiritual leadership of the newly hired pastor is subverted by those who hired him. This almost always hampers the spiritual growth or practices of the church—especially in areas of church discipline. Gary Gilley touches on the effects in his chapter titled, “Church Discipline: The Road to Restoration”:

Church Discipline. The very words strike terror in the heart of most pastors. Their hands sweat, their mouths go dry, . . . What are we to do? To obey God may very well threaten our ministry, our security, our hopes and dreams, not to mention wreaking havoc and strife among the people we love and have devoted our lives to serve. But to disobey God due to our fears and apprehensions is to dishonor Him and abandon the field of spiritual warfare at precisely the wrong moment. . . . Many a pastor has found himself marginalized, or even removed from his ministry, for daring to obey the Word in relation to a family member of a well-connected church leader. (pp. 211,218)

This “conditional leadership” situation comes about from mistaking the role of a pastor in a local fellowship as being that of an externally “hired clergymen” – some sort of “professional” who, rather than being raised up locally into a position of true authority (in conjunction with others), is a hired “holy man” subject to the often less-spiritual committee which retains control over his remuneration and pulls the strings to make him dance like a puppet to their tune.

This is a large subject and this is not the place to discuss all its aspects and practical ways to address them, but lack of plurality, unbiblical distinctions between identical roles, and an unwillingness or inability to raise up elders from the midst of the fellowship are all contributing factors that must be considered.

The last issue I'll touch on in this regard is *allowing fiscal limitations to define spiritual leadership*. By this, I mean the common practice of distinguishing between *paid* and *unpaid* spiritual leaders within the fellowship. Most often, one or two "pastors" are full-time paid staff, while another group of men, generally referred to as "elders" serve with the pastors, but receive little or no remuneration. Almost always, a distinction in authority is made between the paid leaders ("pastors") and the unpaid leaders ("elders"). This is seen as a practical reality because, due to various factors, *the spiritual gifts and needs within a congregation often exceed its financial means*. But in our insistence to treat the office of "pastor" as a paid (read "hired") position, we allow fiscal limitations to unduly influence the form of our spiritual leadership. Instead, any and all men who qualify as elders should be recognized and made such, *regardless of the financial means of the fellowship*. We would naturally expect those elders who can be supported full-time to be more familiar with the day-to-day workings and affairs of the fellowship. They will tend to be those who are "first among equals" within the eldership. But when it comes to spiritual leadership, *all the elders* have equal say (if not equal influence) in decisions.

Those who are not yet familiar with the works of Arnold Fruchtenbaum will find his chapter on "Israelology & the Pastoral Role" to be an eye-opener. With typical clarity, he sets forth the practical implications which a proper understanding of the distinctions between Israel and the church have for the pastor. For example:

Two false views, which only tend to confuse the issue, are circulating among many Christians. One false view is that Gentiles, when they become believers in Christ, become "spiritual Jews." The other is that when a Jew and a Gentile become believers in Christ, all distinctions between the two are erased. The Gentile loses his "Gentilism," to coin a word, and the Jew his Jewishness, for there is no difference between the two whatsoever. Such a view is consistent with all forms of Replacement Theology but it is totally inconsistent with Dispensationalism. Because of a poor theology of Israel Present, even many Dispensationalists hold these views. Pastors who wish to make Jewish believers comfortable in their churches need to deal with these very issues. (p. 123)

Jerry Pelfrey contributes a valuable chapter on "Pastoral Counseling" which deals with a number of important issues, including the sufficiency of the Word in counseling:

The issue of eclecticism in counseling needs to be addressed here. Eclectic means to select from various sources, in our context it deals with the fusion or integration of non-Biblical models with God's authoritative Word. God's Word plus personal experience or God's Word plus psychology or God's Word plus whatever. In the case of

Scripture, addition equals subtraction. Nothing is gained from adding to Scripture; if it is true, we already have it, if it is false, we don't need it. (p. 240)

Several chapters bring into focus the importance of properly identifying and walking in the *Scriptural priorities* of the shepherd in order to avoid a shipwrecked ministry. Writing from the perspective of a pastor's wife, Charlene Pelfrey contributes "An Open Letter to Pastors from a Pastor's Wife: An Appeal to Vigilance":

. . . there is no exception clause in Scripture that excludes the pastor from Biblical directives such as an intimate relationship with his wife (Eph. 5:25, 28-33), the daily communication and discipleship of his children at all ages (1 Tim 3:3-5), providing attentive and interactive leadership and protection of the home that God established (1 Tim. 5:8), rest (Matt 11:28-30) and actually finding great satisfaction and pleasure in so doing (John 10:10, 15:11, Rom. 15:13). This chapter is an appeal, from the perspective of a pastor's wife, for pastors to be vigilant regarding their priorities. (p. 255)

A pastor should also be cautious not to rescue the wrong "damsel in distress." The gesture can be quite flattering to his deserving wife, but an emotional "rescue" from a pastor in a counseling (or other) setting of a vulnerable and/or carnal woman can lead to inappropriate attachments, attraction, and eventual moral failure. Whenever a woman, without her husband present, requires or even requests help or support from a pastor, the pastor's wife or another counselor should be present and actively involved. It is *never* the role of a pastor to meet the emotional needs of a woman aside from those of his own wife. Women, especially those who do not have a fulfilling marriage, can become emotionally attached to a pastor or other church leaders. (p. 263)

These are sound principles which all of who serve as shepherds would do well to consider. Unless elders maintain and grow their personal relationship with God, maintain doctrinal purity, keep themselves, and minister first to their wives and family before the needs of the church, it will only be a matter of time before they are rendered unfit to minister to God's flock.

Henry Vosburgh contributes a chapter titled, "Pastors are Planters" which discusses the pattern of Paul in the evangelistic/missionary work of establishing new churches. After exploring various passages which shed light on how pastors are to function within a newly established work, Vosburgh concludes:

In a time characterized by considerable discussion and postulation about church growth (especially from and among those of the persuasion that Christians must appeal to the culture in order to win the culture), it is refreshing to see what *really* leads to the establishment of a local church. “Strangely” absent from Paul’s process is a marketing strategy, a programmatic scheme, a “worship” format, or a personality-driven agenda. Instead of these things, Paul as a planting pastor simply presented himself in person to these believers, proclaimed the Scriptures to them, modeled Christ before them, and loved them as deeply as the Lord loved him. Planting pastors, in beginning and developing local churches, do well to worry less about the latest trend or fad parading as church growth, and follow the example of the most excellent planting pastor in history. (pp. 331-332)

If the Scriptural example is so clear, we might ask why is it so rare? The answer can be found in another chapter by Cone, “Measuring Success With God’s Purpose in Mind.” Too often we measure our success using the world’s yardstick rather than viewing our work from God’s perspective and recognizing that success must be seen in relation to *God’s purpose*. A proper grasp of this reality will redirect our focus away from external measures of success (e.g., numbers, activities, visibility) to Scriptural measures which give a much more accurate picture of whether we are fulfilling our God-given ministry:

Thus, in light of the first imperative—to guard yourself and your teaching—and in light of the other imperatives, after first evaluation ourselves we might begin to evaluate pastoral ministry by asking some basic questions. Is it driven by and centered on Bible teaching? Is it doctrinally sound? Is it focused on maturity and replication of teachers? Is it in accordance with God’s design for the equipping of saints? Is it guarding and reminding? Is it Biblically grounded in its leadership? Does it reflect Biblical priorities? Is it loving enough to exhort and courageous enough to reprove? These questions may be fairly asked, and represent only a few, at that. Yet with confidence I can assert that answers in the affirmative are reflective of truly successful ministries.

Thus ends a sampling of the sound wisdom and Biblical advice which characterizes this work. All believers, but especially those who serve as pastors/elders/bishops/overseers/shepherds, will find much of value in this practical work.

Reviewed by Tony Garland of www.SpiritAndTruth.org.