

An 'Ode' to the Ordinary Pastor

By Lönngren Taljaard

I must admit, I have a great fascination for ordinary things – things that at first glance may not appear all that majestic, masterful, or even mildly entertaining. Often, while doing things around the house, I would pause the work that I am performing to simply marvel at the mind-boggling simplicity, yet ridiculously obvious value, of ordinary, everyday, humdrum, call-it-what-you-want, objects, be it wheels, gears, gaskets, springs, strings, loops, levers, and the like. Take for instance an ordinary pair of pliers. This is indeed a marvellous invention that an average household simply cannot risk to be without. It is a rugged tool, made to clasp, twist, cut, pull, and though not the advertised use, even hammer home the toughest of nails in the absence of, well, a hammer. At the same time it can be used carefully and precisely enough to do the most sensitive of repair work on our most cherished possessions. Many of us have an appreciation for such ordinary things because they make life live-able.

In an early 20th century collection of poems, entitled “Odes to Common Things,” Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, managed to praise the most ordinary and overlooked of household items. Through the creative employment of rhythm and rhyme he cleverly points to the *basic, yet often overlooked* characteristics of ordinary things that renders them so indispensable to everyday life. This collection includes poems in honour of things like forks, tomatoes, tables, salt, and even a pair of woollen socks, I might add. Despite his obvious communist undertones, it was in particular his praise of “spoons” that I found to aid my mission. Here’s a short excerpt from the poem:

*“Yes, spoon: at mankind’s side
you have climbed mountains,
swept down rivers,
populated ships and cities,
castles and kitchens:
but the hard part of your life’s journey
is to plunge into the poor man’s plate,
and into his mouth.*

*And so the coming of the new life that,
fighting and singing, we preach,
will be a coming of soup bowls,
a perfect panoply of spoons.
An ocean of steam rising from pots*

*in a world without hunger,
and a total mobilization of spoons,
will shed light where once was darkness
shining on plates spread all over the table
like contented flowers."*

I think it is quite obvious that for Neruda the spoon was something far more than a curiously shaped piece of metal, stored in a drawer somewhere in someone's kitchen. Rather, to him it was the quintessential conveyor of health and life. Every time a spoon is plunged into a bowl of hot porridge, it's not just something that makes its way into the dishwashing basin. On the contrary, when used in the right way – which does not include catapult-style food fights – it can be the very instrument of love, care and sustenance it was designed to be as it aims for hungry mouths, instead of food covered faces – Yes, this is the simple, yet ingenious life of a spoon, the creator of which, perhaps, remains unknown. But here's how it becomes really important to understand spoons. According to Neruda, if we overlook the value of the spoon, we will also overlook the value of life itself, and that's plain *frivolous*.

In defence of the value of ordinary things, there are few things as ordinary, yet needed, as pastors of local churches. If ever there was an invaluable, indispensable, nuclear characteristic to society, Bible-believing pastors would be it. It doesn't get more practical and necessary than this. In one sense one can understand why church and pastor can mean little-to-nothing to them who are still unregenerate and in their sins. Yet, it is rather incomprehensible that Bible-believing Christians can be tempted to be the same, in more subtle, or so described, "noble" ways.

One such way is by paying an inordinate amount of attention to well-known pastors of our day. A handsome number of congregants worldwide were drawn to the Bible-believing congregation of their choosing based on the ministry of another faithful minister of the Word, often heard, watched (or both), or read on the internet. These are typically people of the Reformed stock and they fall within that accepted and expected range of biblical orthodoxy. Names like Spurgeon and Stott are as precious to them as Mohler and MacArthur, and this is a good thing! I personally share the same testimony. I have tremendous respect for these men and have personally been blessed by their commitment to the Lord and his Word. But this is not the problem I seek to address. The problem creeps in when church members, against the warning of these well-known pastors, treat *them* with more respect or seriousness than *their own, God-appointed pastors*.

When this happens a church is neglecting the value of a "spoon." This is nothing less than the neglect of a God-given office. And it really betrays a level of ignorance as it involves the functioning of the church. If we are going to treat our pastors as they should be treated, then we need to know what Scripture says about the value of the local church pastor. So, if like me, you have sometimes been tempted to treat the "pastor on the radio" as your own personal pastor, here follows three biblical reasons

why you can take your pastor *seriously* and *respond* to him as the one who God called to shepherd you and your fellow labourers:

His Character

Firstly, your pastor received the God-given responsibility to be an overseer of the flock. Yes, God and people saw him as qualified to join a litany of men who, like him, have for millennia been *called* to exercise oversight over, and care for the precious body of Christ— the people Jesus was willing to die for (Jn. 10:11).

In order to fulfil this role God expects that certain character qualifications be met by him. Paul shared these qualifications with Timothy who, as an elder, had to know what God expected of him as it involved leading the church that God placed in his care (1 Tim. 3:1-7). According to Paul an elder has to be above reproach, in other words, he must be exemplary in his conduct so that people would not doubt his office. Also, an overseer or elder must be faithful in his marriage, if married. In other words, his relationship with his wife has to be a good reflection of Christ's relationship with the church, because that's what marriage reminds us of (Eph. 5:22-33).

Also, he should be receiving his flock hospitably, not as some culinary martyr. Having an open-door policy could be another way of saying this. Furthermore, an elder or pastor must be able to teach the Word of God with accuracy. This is essential as it involves the actual spiritual nourishment of the congregation. For this obvious reason, he cannot be given to alcohol, violent, known as someone who likes to pick fights with others, greedy, someone who neglects family, or someone who has no control over his children.

So far we've seen the characteristics of a man who has walked with the Lord for some years. This is why Paul adds that he cannot be a "milk-drinking" (1 Cor. 3:2), baby Christian, or a new convert. Lastly, he should have a sturdy reputation with people outside of the church who will closely scrutinise him for his beliefs. For this reason, his testimony behind the pulpit should match his testimony in public.

This, to say the least, is a tall order. Have you ever been subjected to these qualifications in a job interview, for instance? Okay maybe for most jobs I suppose a considerable degree of competence and quality of character is needed, and this is to be expected for jobs with a lot of responsibility. So how much more should this be expected for someone who has the God-given responsibility to lead God's flock? Paul successfully makes his point in this passage in his letter to Timothy. This is not an ordinary job. It primarily involves God's glory, with *eternity* and the final destination of people in the balance.

Therefore, in any good church, a pastor is someone who was intensely scrutinised first before he got chosen as the pastor of that church. This is the way God instructs us to approach elder qualification, and all the more reason for members of churches to take their pastors *seriously*. However, as important and non-negotiable the qualifications of an elder should be to any church, so should his *calling*.

His Calling

Now here is where we really can miss the obvious. Your pastor is not some random guy who was picked off the street, and given a podium to say a few things about God, in some random church, or I should hope not. The unique calling of your pastor does not allow for this as much as the biblical qualifications for pastors do not allow for it. The pastor that shepherds you and your fellow labourers has been hand-picked by God specifically for YOUR congregation – not someone else's!

This is where some church members get themselves into trouble. Sadly, through the internet, people allow themselves to be indirectly shepherded by some well-known and respected pastor in the world, this while they do not submit to their own God-ordained pastors as they should. Again, the problem is not the well-known pastor, rather, the problem lies with church members who exhibit less-than-expected commitment to the pastor that was appointed them by God. The ways, although subtle, can be manifold: "But this pastor says this about this passage..." ... "Oh no, he would never council someone that way!" ... "Have you seen how they do it at that church?" ... "I wish he could be more like..."

Anything unbiblical deserves to be denounced, that's a given. But when we treat the internet pastor as our own, this while we have a qualified pastor who, in spite of some non-disqualifying imperfections, already shepherds us – we miss the cardinal nature of the pastor as shepherd. A shepherd is called to actively lead and protect the sheep, something that a far-off shepherd simply cannot do.

For this exact reason, Paul instructed Titus to ensure the appointment of elders for the churches that were placed under his care: "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (Tit. 1:5). Paul here reminded Titus about the importance of local church pastors and elders in leading and shepherding the church, especially as it involved fighting false teaching. Through this we see that there is just no substitute for the personal vigilance that local church pastors can exercise over their churches.

This is quite revealing as it involves the pastor-elders of ordinary churches. Interestingly, God has appointed them to lead their individual flocks specifically, and guard against false teaching that sometimes manifests itself in churches, something which Titus could not do on his own. For this reason we can truly believe in the God-appointed validity and necessity of our own local church pastors and elders. In a very specific sense, the pastors are the ones who have been called to labour day and night for the doctrinal integrity of the churches they have been assigned to. Not only should they be aware of world-wide heretical trends, but they should also be keenly aware of the specific threats to their own congregations and be committed to the biblical ways by which these threats should be addressed. Your pastor(s) have been hand-selected and called by God for this all-important job.

This isn't something that can simply be handled by scanning through a discernment blog, or by watching a DVD course, for instance. No, this can only be handled as the pastor continues to love and teach the people God has called him to, showing himself approved for the job (2 Tim. 2:15). He is the one who has been called by God to "...reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2) as he mobilises God's people to "purge the evil person from among" them (1 Cor. 5:13). For this reason, the pastoral ministry is one of unrestrained commitment.

His Commitment

The last motivation for taking your pastor seriously and actually appreciating his calling involves his level of commitment. And there's three different levels of commitment that we can look at in this regard:

First, our Lord himself set the bar very high when he described to the disciples what the level of his care for them was in John 10. Comparing himself to a shepherd, "The Good Shepherd," he comforts their weak hearts that he would never leave them utterly alone. We see in this passage that he is the one who "calls his own sheep" and who "leads them out," (Jn. 10:3). He is also described as the one whom the sheep know because they "know his voice" (Jn. 10:4). Lastly, Jesus tells them that he would be the one who "lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11). Now just for clarification, we can never be *exactly* like Jesus. In a very, "God-alone" way, Jesus was describing his own personal *care* for the disciples and the added information that he was personally going to *die* for their sins. This is big and has no parallel – full stop. Yet, the Lord calls pastors to be exemplary shepherds – like him.

Jesus emphasised this point when at the end of John's Gospel he questioned Peter about his love for him. This not because he didn't know the answer, but rather because he was evoking commitment from Peter: If Peter truly loved the Lord, then it was not going to be too much asked of him to *act* as a shepherd of the yet future flock. It would not be too much asked to be an under-shepherd who truly *fed* and *tended* to Jesus' sheep (Jn. 22:15-17). This is what pastors are supposed to do. They have not only been called by the Lord to do this, but they themselves have also committed to do it on a daily basis, as the Lord gives them opportunity and strength.

Secondly, the apostle Paul is another example of this kind of commitment. To the Corinthian church he says, "I was *with you* in weakness and in fear and in much trembling," all for the building up of their faith (1 Cor. 2:3). To the Philippians he said that he held them in his *heart*, for they "are all partakers of grace" with him (Phil. 1:7). Lastly, he showed a similar level of commitment to the Thessalonians. The commitment to them was largely threefold. He and his fellow workers *exhorted* them, they continually *encouraged* them, and lastly, they *charged* or commanded them to live godly lives.

This is a responsibility that *only* your pastor can fulfil. No other person on earth can do this as well as the person God has uniquely given the responsibility to watch over your soul (Heb. 13:17). Sure, we learn from other pastors. We are encouraged,

reminded, and motivated by them to live holy lives before the Lord. But your pastor is the man that the Lord has chosen to do this job in a way that *no other pastor can*. That's how God intended it to be, and that's how it should remain.

I often thank the Lord for the ministries of men who write, speak, blog about, and broadcast the undiluted Word of God, let alone the already departed saints who did the same, for centuries before them. However, I am *especially* thankful for those pastors, while growing up and more recently, who personally walked the road of faith alongside me, rebuking me, exhorting me, encouraging me, and constantly keeping watch over my soul. These are truly men, the heads of whom, hands were not laid on hastily (1 Tim. 5:22).

So, here's my best effort at an "ode." By the way, an ode is nothing more than a poetic way of praising something or someone. So here goes. This is a type of "pastoral parody" of the fourth stanza of Neruda's "An Ode to Spoons," which I quoted earlier. I call it, "*An Ode to the Ordinary Pastor*:"

*Yes, pastor: at the sheep's side
You have been there in their triumphs
You have been there in their trials
You have been in their offices and workshops
In their living rooms and next to their hospital beds
But the hardest part of your life's calling,
Is to provide spiritual food for your sheep's plate
And pray that, by God's grace, it will make its way into their souls.
(John 17:17)*