

6

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. – Ephesians 4:11-13

As a pastor, it's easy to think of your job as preaching, or taking care of people, or running a church. These are important tasks, but they are means to an end. Constantly remind yourself of the real goal. **A pastor's job is to equip God's people to do God's work until they resemble God's son.**

In Part 1, we looked at God's work in terms of the purpose of the church, and we examined what it means to become like Jesus. In this chapter we'll focus on how pastors can equip their people for those things. We'll start by looking at the ministry of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus read this passage from Isaiah 61 in one of the first public appearances of his ministry, then he added, *Today as you listen, this scripture has been fulfilled*

(Luke 4:18-21).

If you look at the Isaiah passage, you will see that Jesus stopped reading right in the middle of a sentence. The next line, the one he did not read, refers to *the day of vengeance of our God* (Isaiah 61:2). Jesus was interested in good news and freedom. He left judgment and vengeance for God to take care of at the end of time.

At the same time, Jesus never compromised truth in order to please people or keep them coming to him. At the beginning of John 6, five thousand people were following Jesus. Many pastors would have said “Hallelujah!” and started a building campaign. Not Jesus. He told them the difficult truths that God wanted them to hear, and he kept on until by the end of the chapter almost all had deserted him. In John 8:30 many believed in Jesus because of what he said, including some of the Jewish leaders. Most pastors would have praised God and started a baptism party. But Jesus kept talking, and by the end of the chapter these same leaders were looking for stones to kill him.

This is not to say that a faithful preacher cannot also have a large church. The point is that as a pastor, **your first concern must be to proclaim God’s word, not to make yourself popular.**

Jesus took the long view. It was fine with him if a lot of folks wanted to follow him around, but his focus was on preparing people who would carry on the work when he was gone. Jesus spent a little time with the crowds, more time with the disciples who followed him from place to place, and the most time with the twelve apostles, especially Peter, James and John. He carefully trained and equipped his followers. He taught them the truths, showed them how to apply them, and then sent them out two by two to practice. His last words recorded by Matthew are instructions to **follow the same pattern** in training and equipping others from every nation (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus is not the only biblical example of an effective godly church leader. Study the accounts in Acts of Christian leaders in action. Read Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, chief pastors in Ephesus and Crete. These short letters are commonly called the “pastoral epistles” because of their practical advice for leading a church. Find lessons in the other epistles and Jesus’ letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. And don’t neglect leadership principles

that can be gleaned from the Old Testament, history and even the secular world – always filtering out the parts that are not in keeping with the message and ways of Jesus.

Your Responsibility

As pastor, some things are your responsibility, and some are not. Many church people will be happy to tell you exactly what they think your job is. **Make sure you get your job description from God.** He is the one you work for, not the church folks, even if God uses them to pay your salary.

Here are some responsibilities I believe are essential in every pastor's job description.

Minister to God in praise and worship

I read of a man in England who stopped one evening at a small country church just in time for the daily evening service. He was the only one there, so he was surprised that the pastor went through the entire service with grace and dignity. After it was over he asked the pastor what he would have done if he had not happened to be driving past and come in. The pastor said he would have conducted the service just the same.

"With no one here?" asked the man.

The pastor replied, "God is here."

1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:6 tell us that we are all called to be priests. The function of a priest is to minister to God. The presence of other people is nice, but not necessary. In fact, in the Old Testament, the most important function of the High Priest's ministry was conducted in the Holy of Holies, where no other human being was allowed to come.

There are many ways to minister to God. Rituals, prayers, journaling, silence, even serving other people can be ways of ministering to God. The point is not how you do it, but why.

A good pastor has to be people-oriented. But never forget that **your first**

duty and responsibility is to minister to God.

Hear from God

Perhaps the most important skill you can develop as a pastor is the ability to hear from God. I pray often, “Lord, help me know your will and your way with clarity, accuracy, confidence and timely obedience.” It’s not your church, and it’s not the people’s church. It’s God’s church. What does God want you tell them today? Where does God want you to take them this week?

After ministering to God, receiving God’s guidance for his church is the most important thing you do. In fact, God’s guidance will often come as you are ministering to God (Acts 13:2). That’s why the devil tries so hard to distract you from it.

Don’t let that happen. Devote whatever time it takes until you know God’s direction. Then do it again tomorrow, and the next day, and every day, because God usually only guides us one day at a time.

The pastor is not the only person who can discern God’s direction for a church. Often this kind of guidance happens best through a group of leaders. Sometimes there are people in the congregation who are especially gifted at hearing from God. As pastor, develop as many of these avenues of communication from God as you can.

Bring God’s message and love to the church

As you spend time with God, God will show you different things. He may bring to mind certain Bible truths that the church needs to be taught for a certain time or situation. He may make you aware of areas that need to be addressed in sermons. He may show you a vision of where he wants you to lead his people in some new ministry or outreach.

All these things reveal God’s love. Part of your job as pastor is to pass them on to the people as effectively as possible, in whatever ways are appropriate for the specific message and situation.

Bring the needs of the church to God

Your people expect you to be praying for them. As pastor, you may be the only one who knows all the different needs of the church and how they interact. Prayer is the most important thing you can do to get these needs met.

In my opinion, **one of the most important and most neglected truths in the church as a whole is the power of prayer.** I'm convinced that when we get to heaven we will be astonished at the things God wanted to do that didn't get done because we didn't pray (see Ezekiel 22:30-31). Spend much time in prayer yourself, and make prayer a priority in your church. Older people in particular may feel that they have little they can contribute. Yet they often have the experience and maturity, and the time, to become some of your most effective prayer warriors. Encourage them in this.

While you're at it, teach your people to pray for you. Some pastors develop an intercessory team whose main focus is to pray for the pastor. They call this a "prayer shield." It can make a huge difference in your ministry.

Lead the church to follow God

It's not enough to tell the church where God wants them to go and what God wants them to do. Somebody has to get out in front and lead the way. This is also your job. That doesn't always mean you have to literally be the first person in a certain ministry, although it might. Or it could mean you draw up a plan, or identify participants, or gather resources, to help others get something started.

There are many different leadership styles. Sometimes you need to be directive, sometimes you need to work with a team, sometimes you just need to get the right people together and let them go at it. Use whatever leadership style works best for you to see that your church follows where God is calling.

Introduce people to Jesus

So far we've been talking about the church as an institution and the people who are part of it. What about people who are not part of the church and don't know Jesus? Paul wrote Timothy, *Do the work of an evangelist* (2 Timothy 4:5).

As your church grows and takes up more and more of your attention, you can find yourself spending all your time with church folks. This is natural. They are your friends, you share common values and beliefs and activities, you like being with them. Even if you don't like being with them sometimes (let's be realistic here), it's your job. And when you aren't spending time with church folks, you are spending time with God, or preparing sermons, or being with your family, or unclogging the church toilets, or any of the thousand other things that need doing. But **how can you do the work of an evangelist if you never spend time with anyone who doesn't know Jesus?**

It can be especially easy to fill your time with all those other activities if you are not one for whom personal evangelism comes naturally. Some pastors know all about the doctrine of salvation, but they find it very difficult to help people personally apply it to get saved. If this is you, it's important not only to make time to interact with those who need Jesus, but also to learn and practice some basic personal evangelism skills. Find someone good at it and ask them to give you some pointers. Go with them as they share the gospel. Don't be afraid to admit that there are things you still need to learn or improve.

Counsel

Things don't always go smoothly in life, even for Christians. People have trouble with their marriages or children. They face disappointments, temptations and addictions. They get bad news about their jobs or their health. Some of these people will come to you for help.

Psychology and psychiatry, like other fields of medicine, are wonderful

gifts from God that can bring great healing. But they focus on the mind and emotions. They rarely deal with the spirit, if they even recognize its reality. That's where you come in.

1. **Start with prayer.** Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you and bring wisdom and healing, and continue to listen for his guidance.

2. **Listen.** If the person wants to talk, don't interrupt, except for clarification.

3. **Ask open-ended questions** if they haven't said enough.

4. **Look beyond the presenting problem.** Usually the first concern people talk about is not the underlying issue.

5. **Seek spiritual gifts** (1 Corinthians 12:8, 10, 31). Ask God for special gifts of knowledge, wisdom and discernment of spirits. Don't discount the possibility of the demonic, especially if there is a history of occult or pagan involvement. If you believe that is the issue, get help from a mature Christian experienced in this area.

6. **Share Biblical principles.** Read relevant Bible passages aloud and teach how to apply them. Many problems can be traced to believing the devil's lies instead of Bible truth. Write out scripture references so the person can go back to them.

7. **Give practical exercises** to reinforce and apply the Biblical principles. These might include Bible readings, verses to memorize, prayer suggestions, affirmations to repeat, books to read, and support groups.

8. **Refer** the person to professionals if you believe they need medical or psychological help.

9. **End with prayer.**

Providing Biblical counsel can be very rewarding, but it can also offer some snares. Beware of feeling like you have to solve all the person's problems. Don't let the person begin to intrude on your personal time or family life. And guard against inappropriate attachments.

Visit the sick, imprisoned and grieving

When people are suffering, the family of God should be there for them. Often, the pastor represents that family.

When I first started in ministry, my big question in these situations was, “What should I say? What should I do?” Often, saying and doing is not as important as just being there, sharing a “ministry of presence.”

That said, there are some basic rules that apply to all these situations.

1. **Prepare yourself** with prayer, and open yourself for God’s guidance.
2. If they are in a hospital, prison or other institution, follow the rules and **cooperate** with the staff.
3. **Don’t say you know how they feel.** Unless you have been in the same situation, you don’t, and they know it.
4. Avoid the temptation to explain why bad things happen to good people. It’s an interesting intellectual exercise, but this is not the time for it. **Suffering people don’t need explanations, they need comfort.**
5. **Read Scripture.** Ask God to show you what the person needs to hear.
6. **Pray** with them. Silently ask God to show you what to pray, then pray it aloud with faith.
7. After you leave, **take care of yourself.** Wash your hands. Recognize if it has been hard on you emotionally, and take time to recover. I make a practice of saying a cleansing prayer, using the authority of Genesis 1:28 and Mark 16:17 to command pathogens and spirits of disease or decay to leave my body, and inviting the Holy Spirit to fill me with life (Romans 8:11).

Help people learn to hear from Jesus for themselves

In the 1990s American church leaders started talking about how pastors should cast a vision for their churches, an idea of how God wants the church to look in the future. I asked God to give me a vision for the church I was serving at the time. I expected a picture of overflowing services, new ministries, perhaps a larger building. The only thing that came to me was an image of a person walking. I figured that couldn’t be right, so I asked God again.

Again all that came was the idea of a person walking. So I started prayerfully thinking about it.

I realized that when I walk, my brain doesn't consciously tell each part of my body how to move. "Shift weight to right foot. Pick up left foot. Swing left foot forward. Set left foot down. Shift weight to left foot..." If that's what it took, I'd never get anywhere, or at least I'd look like a rusty robot.

When you walk, each part of your body knows what it is supposed to do, and it does it. The movements all fit together smoothly because each part is connected with your head in subconscious coordination. Your conscious mind isn't even aware of most of the muscle movements involved.

I think God was showing me that this is how he wants his church to operate. The Bible calls the church the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). Jesus is the head (Colossians 1:18). Every member of the church, every Christian, should be directly communicating with Jesus, just as every part of your body directly communicates with your brain. A church where nobody does anything until the pastor tells them to will be as uncoordinated as a body where each motion has to come from a conscious thought.

Unfortunately, since the fall of Adam and Eve, human beings have not had a good connection with Jesus the head. That's what died when they ate the forbidden fruit. When we are born again, that connection is restored. But just as a person recovering from a stroke may need much physical therapy before the body learns to hear from the brain again, **Christians need spiritual training before they learn to recognize and obey the voice of their head, Jesus.** As a pastor, that training is one of your most important jobs.

Be sure you **teach your people that they will not all hear the same thing from God.** Think about your normal walking motion. What are your hands doing? They swing. Do they swing together, in unison? No, one hand swings forward, and at the same time, the other hand moves backward. Your hands are going opposite directions from each other. Does this mean one hand is right and the other is wrong? Of course not. It's necessary for them to go in different directions.

In the same way, God will not direct all your people to do the same thing at the same time. If they all try to do just what you are doing, or just what some

respected elder in the church is doing, then a lot of other necessary things won't get done, and the church will have a tough time moving. So teach your people not to judge each other if they don't all do exactly the same thing. In musical terms, the goal is a symphony of harmonies, not a unison chorus.

Help people do what Jesus is leading them to do

What is involved in equipping people to do God's work? Recruiting, planning, teaching, training, demonstrating, resourcing, motivating, overseeing, correcting and evaluating are all important elements. **You need a plan and a process for each one of those elements, for every kind of ministry.**

Take time periodically, and especially when you are starting a new ministry or program, to think about each of those elements of equipping people. For each element, ask yourself, what is my plan? How well is it working? How much are other people involved? How much do they understand the process, and their part in it? The good news is, you don't have to invent all those plans and processes yourself. You can often borrow them from other pastors or learn them from books or conferences. As pastor, it is your responsibility to see that your people are able and ready to do what God is calling your church to do.

Then set them free to do it. If your church only does what you as the pastor tell them to do, you are limiting your church to your own ideas and imagination, or at the most, to your own ability to hear from God. Usually this also means that you will be expected to personally oversee the activity, so it often means that you are also limiting your church to the amount of activities you have time to attend.

On the other hand, if you teach your people to hear from God, you will find that they begin coming to you with ideas. Your job then will be to encourage them, perhaps connect them with others in the church who might work on the same project, provide them with any training or resources they need, and give them moral support. They will be motivated and excited. If they truly heard from God, they will most likely be successful. **And you can relax and watch your church move forward.**

Correct as necessary

What if somebody thinks God is telling them to do something that is clearly wrong? Then it is your job as pastor to correct them. And it is their job as a member of the church to accept that correction.

I remember the first time I did a study of how the Bible describes the pastoral role. I was amazed at how many times Paul told Pastors Timothy and Titus to correct, instruct, reprove and even rebuke their church members.

Correction is not an enjoyable part of the job. Some pastors even avoid such confrontations, for the sake of keeping peace. This rarely works. If someone thinks God is guiding them in ways that are contrary to Scripture or sound Christian practice, it will eventually lead to trouble, not only for them, but also for the church and for you. And **the longer you let it go, the worse the trouble will be.**

If you believe someone is in sin or error requiring a correction or rebuke, first make sure you are right. Verify the facts about what the other person is saying or doing. Then make sure it is indeed against Scripture or against God's clear direction for your church, and not just against your own opinion. When you speak, remember to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), with the emphasis on love. Think in terms of showing a child how to do something the proper way. And be sure to encourage them to try again. If they accept your correction, praise the Lord! If they don't, Jesus clearly laid out the steps to follow in Matthew 18:15-17. (I discuss this more in Chapter 17.)

Not Your Responsibility

As important as it is to know what your job is, it may be even more important to know what your job is not.

It's not your job to make everybody happy

Good pastors like people. When you like people, you want them to be happy. But you can't make everybody happy all the time. There are many issues in a church where Brother A likes things one way, and Sister B likes things another way. If you make Brother A happy, you make Sister B unhappy. **Not even Jesus made everybody happy all the time.** So don't worry about it. In fact, if some people discover that you are really concerned about keeping them happy, they will try to use that to control you and the church. Some of the biggest problems I have encountered in my ministry came when leaders in a church tried too hard to appease complainers.

People are usually happiest when they are comfortable, which usually means when they are doing the same things they have always done. But if we always do the same thing, we'll never grow, as a Christian or as a person. Somebody said, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got."

Romans 12:2 says we are to be transformed. Transformation is change. Change makes many people unhappy. So sometimes your job as a pastor requires you to say and do things that will make some people unhappy. To be a faithful pastor, you have to say or do them anyway. **If you use wisdom and make sure the people know you love them, you will usually be alright.**

It's not your job to tell people what to do

In the late 1970s a movement called "shepherding" arose in many American churches. The basic idea was good: it was a time of revival in America and many new people were coming to Christ, including many young people without much experience in the world. Some pastors began to see it as their responsibility to help these new Christians make godly decisions, especially about important matters such as marriage, jobs, and buying a house. Unfortunately, what started as advice gradually became control. Church members were expected to come to their pastors or "shepherds" for guidance on every aspect of their lives, and follow their directions without question.

This included such personal issues as what car to buy and even who to marry. Some pastors began to abuse this power. Many people left those churches or stopped going to church altogether.

There are no New Testament examples of authority figures in the church requiring obedience to their dictums, even in church business, much less in personal lives. Instead, the Bible says *Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture!* (1 Corinthians 13:9). When one person gives a word they believe to be from the Lord, others should weigh or judge it (1 Corinthians 14:29-31).

In the church age, no one person speaks infallibly for God – not even the pastor. God can use any Christian to speak God’s word into a situation. Then God expects the hearers to weigh the word and compare it to the teaching of the Bible. Even the Apostle Paul accepted the freedom of other Christians to sharply disagree with him, except in matters of clear violation of Scripture (see Acts 15:37-39).

This means we should be careful about using Old Testament figures such as Moses and David as leadership examples for today. We can certainly learn from their methods of organization and dealing with people. But we can’t follow them in demanding unquestioning obedience.

As a pastor, your goal is to help your people grow spiritually until they are like Jesus (Ephesians 4:11-13). One of Jesus’ prime characteristics was his ability to hear from God. How can our people learn to do that if we are always telling them every detail of what to do?

As pastor, it is your responsibility to hear from God on behalf of the church you serve. It’s not your job to take the place of the Holy Spirit for the individuals in your church.

It’s not your job to do everything

Some pastors seem to feel that it is up to them to do everything around the church. Sometimes this is because they are not good delegaters. Sometimes it’s because they are perfectionists and feel that only they can do things right. Sometimes it’s because they feel like they have to be constantly working.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

The apostles served as pastors of the early Jerusalem church. When an issue arose around the food ministry, they didn't step in and take care of everything. Their response was, *We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program* (Acts 6:1). Then they basically said, "Get a group together and deal with it yourselves."

If you are the founding pastor of a church of new converts, then for a time you may indeed be the only person who knows how to do the things that need to be done. But if you are a good pastor, you will be training and equipping your people for the work of ministry. Part of that training is to gradually give them responsibility for part of the work. **As your people mature and your church grows, you should be doing less and less of the routine work.** In fact, you should work toward the place where the only things you do are the things that only you can do. Your people should take care of the rest.

It's not your job to be served

I wish I didn't have to write this, but it's a sad fact that some pastors seem to feel they deserve all sorts of special honors and privileges, just because they are pastors. 1 Timothy 5:17 does say that preachers and teachers are to be held in special honor. However, this is to come from the people. **The Bible never says pastors (or anyone else) should demand to be honored.** In fact, just the opposite is true. We are to follow the example of Jesus, who washed his disciples' feet, and said, *The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve* (Matthew 20:28).

Points to Remember

- Your job is to equip God's people to do God's work until they resemble God's Son.
- Being faithful is more important than being popular.
- Minister to God, hear from God, and speak for God.
- Pray for the church, equip the church, and lead the church.
- Know what is not part of your job.