Parameters for Pastor-Centric Leadership

*Rethinking Church, part 4*

*Click here for part 1, 2, 3*

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On our journey of *Rethinking Church*, we have determined that the church is wrapped in mystery and is a *being* organization, not a *doing* organization in its purpose. In the last article, I described the Pastor as the only organizational office in the church, with the role of rule over the congregation under Christ’s ultimate rule. I explained my belief in a single-pastor system (rather than multiple Elders) within a local congregation. Objections to this type of leadership office are completely *pragmatic* since the Biblical text can grammatically be read as multiple or single Elders and the Biblical norm is a single Pastor.

If a church is “pastor-centric” in leadership, with only one Pastor, doesn’t this create a huge potential for abuse and scandal? Where are the checks and balances? Does this view fail to take the fallen nature of man into account?

I am convinced that God has built checks and balances into the system, and that man doesn't need to create new safeguards based on his own systems. In like manner, there are no man-made checks and balances in a marriage, where the husband has pastor-like rule of his home. When the husband fails in his role, it is a colossal public and painful failure. Rather than build in a safety-net, God has given a husband instruction on *how* to carry out his rule. Thus, like the pastor, the husband has a built-in set of checks and balances.

When the Pastor fails, the failure is a colossal public and painful failure. Because of this, every Biblical safeguard against this failure needs to be in place.

What are these safeguards?

**The Calling of the Pastor**

Years ago, the call of a Pastor was taken with much higher regard than today. Potential candidates were most often well-known to the congregants and the congregation itself was primary in the call. Often the congregation would call one of its own as their Pastor, sensing a call of God on the life of one of its young men who, many times, did not even sense the calling himself. If he did sense it, he would not
express it until the congregation first noticed this call. Even with this calling from the congregation, the young pastoral candidate was seriously questioned concerning Biblical knowledge and the deep issues of doctrinal importance. Today, however, congregations have grown so large (a result of the never-ending *do something* dilemma) that the members scarcely know another member to the degree necessary to have any insight into a call of God on his life. The call, then, comes from the candidate himself rather than the congregation. Sensing this call, the candidate seeks approval from the congregation, which willingly doles it out, eager to have another preacher associated with their congregation. A few men will ask a few perfunctory questions quickly before an ordination service, and the young man is off and running as the town’s newest reverend.

With this new method of calling, it is no wonder we have had to devise every form of checks and balances known to man! We have, serving as Pastors, self-called men whose call would never have been recognized by the congregation in the first place. If a man senses a call, that call is never questioned and his doctrinal and moral integrity is scarcely glanced over.

The Biblical model, however, was given to Timothy, to whom Paul said these words:

> "Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all." (1 Timothy 4:14–15, NASB95)

Notice that there was great care in the calling, and Timothy was to take great care in the fulfillment. The call makes a difference! Timothy was later told, "*Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin.*" (1 Timothy 5:22, NASB95)

When it comes to calling, the church should slow down! A strong and real call from God, so evident that it is recognized by the congregation, will ensure that only God-called men enter the ministry. I believe Paul says, "*Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily*” because this new Pastor is going to be in a place of authority that cannot quickly nor lightly be dismissed. It is much the same advice we would give to a young woman considering a proposal from a young man, “*Don’t put a ring on his finger too quickly!*” Why? Because when you’ve got him, you’ve got him! He will be the head of the home, with almost no checks and balances. The young woman better make sure she has a quality man!

### The Followship of the Pastor

The biggest failure of pastors is not often immoral, unbiblical, or illegal. Rather, Pastors fail in leadership, ministry, and people skills. I have visited with a lot of pastors who were under attack. I can’t think of a single one who was under attack for a clearly sinful issue. Almost always, I hear something like this:

- They say my sermons are too long
- I’m told that I don’t visit the hospital enough
- The deacons want to know our vision as a church
- We have too much division among the members, even among the staff
• Our giving is down because people are not satisfied with our church.

I am convinced that these are bogus attacks on the Pastor, and are really an indictment on the congregation. In fact, if a congregation will follow its Pastor quickly and easily, these problems will almost immediately disappear, either because they didn’t exist in the first place (they were a straw man), or because Pastors are eager to please church members who are eager to follow.

The Bible says that church members are to, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17, NASB95). When you stand before the judgment throne in a judgment of your works, you will not be asked to judge your Pastor’s leadership skills. No, you see, the judgment will be about your followship skills!

Revelation 2:27 speaks of Christ ruling the nations with a rod of iron. Revelation 7:17 speaks of the Shepherd, who “will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.” These two passages use the same word (poimano) to describe the activity of the Lamb, but in one verse it is translated rule and in the other shepherd. The difference is the context, and the major difference in context is the congregation. The nations only stubbornly follow His rule, while in chapter 7 the congregation had given their lives for their “Pastor,” the Lord. In context, if you are stubborn, obstinate, and generally belligerent, the Pastor will have a difficult time, and anything he does takes rulership with a rod of iron. If you are eager to follow, the slightest turn of the hand will be received with the welcome response of the congregation, who will turn in unison with their shepherd. The bottom line is this: The better the followship, the better the Pastor! You can avoid or even overcome the flaws and failures of your pastor by following him. This is a Biblical model, and far more effective than instituting man-made checks and balances.

The Love of the Church

Much like followship, only deeper, one of the best defenses against the failure of a pastor is the church’s love for that pastor.

Paul gave instruction through Timothy that, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’” (1 Timothy 5:17–18, NASB95). Even more than the wages of the minister is the expression of honor that a congregation shows its Pastor. While this can sound much like a self-serving plea, coming from a Pastor, I can tell you from over 20 years of personal experience that a loved Pastor is a Pastor who is not likely to fail in his task.

I’m not talking about the pseudo-love that many bring when they say, “Now Pastor, we love you and your family and we want the best for you.” Every time a Pastor hears those words he should stop the conversation and say, “good, you need say no more!” However, those who come to speak the words usually have more to say, and the “more” is the real intent of their conversation.
I am talking about the kind of love that truly honors the office of Pastor and the man who fills that office. When there is a true love for the Pastor, that love is so easily seen that the Pastor is compelled to give the congregation or its members his ear, and try to see if there is a better way. Acts 18 records the story of Apollos, a man eloquent of speech and well-versed in the Scriptures, but unaware of the full truth of what Jesus had accomplished. Aquila and Priscilla took him aside and shared “a more excellent way.” Apollos became so well-accomplished as a Pastor that his ministry rivaled the Apostle Paul in some respects (see 1 Cor. 1:12). I do not believe I am reading too much into the text to see the love of Aquila and Priscilla for Apollos, which doubtless opened Apollos’ mind to this critical point of correction.

Does the Pastor have to have a love for his congregation? Certainly, and this has been addressed in his duty to “tend my sheep.” Remember, tend is a tender word, a word of watchcare, and cannot be done without a love for and commitment to the well-being of the sheep. Such responsibility, however, does not release the congregation from its obligation to give honor to the elder who rules, and double honor to the elder who rules well.

**The Spirit of the Pastor**

The old saying, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” has some wisdom. The Pastor who believes he has, and should have, absolute power will be absolutely dangerous. The same is true with a husband who rules his home with an absolute authority that has no spirit of love. Such may be the arranged marriage of a Muslim man, for example, who has no love for his wife, but only views her as a means to his dinner and delights.

But the Pastor, like the Husband, is granted final earthly authority under the Lord within a certain domain. One of the guarding forces that keeps both Pastor and husband from abusing this authority is their spirit. This spirit should be tested and trusted in advance, because in the exercise of authority it will never be felt by the recipient. That last sentence is to protect the Pastor from the one who now says “Our Pastor has no pastoral spirit!” It may be his pastoral spirit which led to your disapproval!

What is the spirit that a Pastor (or husband) should bring to his task? I think it is best described by this familiar Gospel passage:

““You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. “If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. “For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you.” (John 13:13–15, NASB95)

The image of the foot-washing servant is the ideal image of the Pastor’s spirit. If the Pastor continually reminds himself, “I came not to be served, but to serve” then he will do well.

Why then are so many pastors insisting on prime parking, red-carpet welcomes, continual public displays of their honor, and don’t-call-me-I’ll-call-you environments? In many ways these Pastors remind me of King Herod more than King Jesus! The Christ-like Pastor lays
aside the Armani suit, dons the cloth towel, and washes the dirty feet of disciples whom he loves, and by whom he is loved. This spirit keeps him from abusing his God-given authority.

**Four Plus One**

There are four safeguards to keep a Pastor from abuse of authority, and there is one remedy when that authority is misused or abused in some manner. That remedy is the discipline of the Pastor, which is the topic of the next post in this series.

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