

# THE PASTOR & HIS WIFE AS SPIRITUAL PARENTS

by Michael Rudolph

It has come to my attention that some pastors and their wives do not understand and embrace their God-ordained roles to be spiritual parents in their congregations. The word “pastor” (in Greek **ποιμῆν**, *poimen* {*poy-mane*}) means “shepherd,” or “herdsman” – one who leads sheep. Scripture states:<sup>1</sup>

*“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Messiah – from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.” (Ephesians 4:11-16).*

Notice the elements contained in the above passage. “Equipping,” “edifying,” leading to “knowledge,” to a “perfect” man and to “fullness,” so that we are no longer “children” and, instead, “grow up.” This is the description and role of a parent.

Seminaries, being academic institutions, effectively teach aspiring pastors to equip and edify their future flocks in the realm of biblical knowledge, but they are typically weak in teaching the broader parenting skills of helping their congregants “grow up.” As a consequence, many pastors perceive their roles as being technicians of the Word, and their only domain to be in the pulpit and the classroom. They do not consider their flock their children, nor do they perceive themselves as fathers.<sup>2</sup>

Pastors’ wives face their own special challenges. They often entered into their marriage knowing that their husbands-to-be were (or would become) pastors. They may even have been warned prior to marrying that, because of their husbands’ profession, they would have to share their husbands’ time and attention with others. But what many a pastor’s wife did not consider or come to terms with, is how marrying a pastor defines her own

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<sup>1</sup> New King James Version.

<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul describes his role of giving comfort and instruction as that of a father, in 1 Thessalonians 2:10-11.

role; for if her husband becomes a congregation's father then, as his helper<sup>3</sup> (and almost by definition), she becomes its mother.<sup>4, 5</sup>

The problem with a man and his wife entering pastoral ministry without enthusiastically embracing congregational parenthood is that they cannot fully meet their congregants' needs or expectations. Congregants, often parents themselves, look to their pastors and pastors wives as surrogate parents, expecting no less from them than to be Scripture's depiction of the perfect father and mother – not only to their natural children, but to them. They will seek them out for counsel in the most intimate of life's circumstances, and will hold them accountable for how well they fulfill their parental role.

As with natural children, congregants behave well at times and misbehave at times. Misconduct is sometimes willful, and sometimes results from ignorance of God's standards. As with natural children, congregants must be prayed for, taught the way they should go, be given praise when it is earned, and be corrected, chastened, and even punished when it is required. And as with natural children, there will be habits to break, habits to form, and repentances to pursue. The pastor and his wife must expect this, and be proactive in their congregational "parenthood. And just as natural children sometimes rebel against their parents, so too, congregants sometimes rebel against their pastors, potentially causing hurt and disappointment. Yet just as natural parents are called to love and serve their children through thick and thin, so are pastors likewise called. A pastor's role, like a parent's role, is to love sacrificially, so therefore, a congregant's problems and even aberrant behaviors ought to be approached, not with dread, but as opportunities to minister in faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit to set their congregational "children" back on the right road. If the pastor and his wife struggle against this or give in to its disappointments, they will eventually become embittered and burned out.

Now that I have stated the problem, I would like to offer some guidance for men who are pursuing (or are already engaged in) pastoral ministry.

First, if you are currently studying for or pursuing the pastorate, seek counsel with others and prayerfully consider your readiness to undertake the role of being a father. If you are a young man, you must be prepared to father others who may be older than yourself. In this you must be bold in the Spirit and assured of your commission from God. If God has sent you, He will give you a mantle of fatherhood that others will recognize and acknowledge. If you do not have faith for it, you are not ready or you are not called.

If you are an unmarried man who is about to undertake the fatherly role of pastoring, be aware that the woman God wants you to marry must likewise be called. You must make her aware of the expectation of congregational motherhood that will be thrust upon her,

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:18.

<sup>4</sup> The Apostle Paul analogizes his gentle nurture as that of a mother, in 1 Thessalonians 2:7.

<sup>5</sup> Consider the implications of Titus 2:3-4.

and she must be willing to embrace it; if she is not willing, although she may be ideal in many ways, she is either not ready, or is not called, to be your wife.

If you are already pastoring or are the wife of a pastor, and either or both of you are distressed by the notion that God expects you to parent your flock, even now you should go before the Lord and ask Him whether He called you to pastor, or whether He would have you do something else. If you are certain that you are properly called, then step out in faith, accept the responsibility of your parenthood, and expect that God will give you all you need to fulfill it. If you are unsure of some of the particulars of good parenting, consult the Scriptures that teach the relational attributes of our Father in heaven, and also seek the counsel of a pastor and his wife whom you believe are gifted and successful in their pastoral parental roles.

Choosing to be a pastor, or to continue being one, is a critically important decision because it affects the lives of so many. We can consider our options, seek advice, and test for skills, but the only assurance we can ever have that we have chosen correctly is when we hear it from God Himself. As with other things in life, if we step out without God's approval, we can easily start down a path that He did not intend. God may bless it even then, or He may re-direct us but, either way, we will be fulfilled and successful if God is in it; if He is not, our ministry will not prosper and those for whom we are responsible will not be well served.

So let us earnestly seek the Lord and be obedient to His leading. If He intends us to pastor, then He intends us to be fathers to our flock, and for our wives to be mothers. We can expect then that He will move in us, and gift us, so that our congregational parenting becomes natural, fulfilling, and joyful.

March 13, 2005  
Revised January 6, 2012