Personal Philosophy of Pastoral Ministry

I recently came across an article on pastoral ministry by Philip Ryken, president of Wheaton College and former pastor of 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. One of the goals of the article was to help pastors see how God brings about fruitful ministry through imperfect ministers, and to that end he quoted another author who said:

Being ordained is not about serving God perfectly but about serving God visibly, allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching you rise and fall. You probably won't be much worse than other people, and you certainly won't be any better, but you will have to let people look at you. You will have to let them see you as you are.

This quote reminds me of one of the trademarks of Martin Luther’s ministry: to live and serve and share life among God’s people as one of them. In his day, that was a revolutionary idea. While it’s not such a new concept anymore, I do think in practice it’s good to be reminded of the high calling of humility and transparency in pastoral ministry. Whatever roles and responsibilities being a pastor entails, it is fundamentally the work of a sinner saved by grace, just like anybody else.

That said, I do believe the Bible places a unique and high calling on pastors (1 Timothy 5:17; James 3:1) and gives plenty of instruction on which to build a philosophy, or approach, to pastoral ministry. In the sections that follow, I will frame my approach using the Scriptures that have most shaped my thinking, and I’ll categorize my thoughts under the following general headings:

The Goals of Pastoral Ministry,
The Tasks of Pastoral Ministry,
The Personal Life of the Pastor &
The Relationship between the Pastor and the Church.

The Goals of Pastoral Ministry

To make disciples of Jesus Christ, baptize them, and teach them to walk in the obedience of faith {Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 1:5}

I don’t know of a clearer or more comprehensive starting point to a philosophy of pastoral ministry than the commission Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20. His message is clear in his statement that everything in Christian ministry must be about the primary goal of making disciples, followers of Christ. His message is comprehensive because he teaches that being a disciple is grounded in his authority, his identity, his commands and his presence. In other words, Jesus does not call the pastor to do anything on his own, but to do everything in and through the power and presence of Christ for the purpose of making people like Him.

I love Paul’s summary of Christ’s commission in his purpose statement for writing to the Romans: to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among the nations. As a banner over the multifaceted ministry of the local church pastor, these words stand as the first and most important goal: make disciples.
To equip and empower disciples to do the work of ministry {Ephesians 4:11-16}

My natural instinct is to do, not delegate. So one of the more significant developments in my ministry so far was when the Lord pressed on me these verses from Ephesians 4. I’m sure to some it’s obvious, but to me it has been life-changing to begin thinking through the idea that my calling as a pastor is not to do as much “work of the ministry” as possible. Rather, it’s to provide opportunities for others to serve and grow in areas where God has gifted them and equipped them for ministry. Jesus Christ came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45), so at the heart making disciples is the goal of helping every member of the Body find a meaningful place to serve that helps them and others grow in the grace of God and live in the obedience of faith.

Before I stepped into the interim senior pastor role at Crossroads, I tried to put feet on this goal in a few ways: 1) by allowing regular opportunities for our two lay worship leaders to use and develop their gifts for planning and leading worship, 2) by creating administrative roles in the music ministry, and 3) by initiating a weekly shepherding group to help equip and empower our ministry leaders.

The Tasks of Pastoral Ministry

Prayer and the Ministry of the Word {Acts 6:4}

The division of labor recorded in Acts 6 between the work of the apostles and deacons serves as a helpful framework for the general ministry tasks of the pastor-elder. Personally, it helps me remember that my unique calling is to serve the church by disciplining myself to focus primarily on the ministries of prayer and the word. In practical terms, these ministries seem to fall into three basic categories.

Preaching & Teaching

2 Timothy 4:1-5; Colossians 1:21; Mark 1:38-39

When I need inspiration for ministry, there is not a more soul-stirring passage to read than the charge Paul gave Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1-2. I believe preaching should be the central defining element in the life of any church; and the honor of being entrusted to declare the word of God week-in and week-out is the greatest privilege and opportunity I can imagine. More than any other single task of ministry, my greatest passion and life work is to grow and develop in all the graces and skills that make up a God-honoring and compelling preacher.

Teaching, as an element of preaching and as a ministry of its own (i.e. classes, Bible studies, etc.), is also a primary ministry of the word and must be done well. As Christians, we are people of a book. The Bible contains the single, infallible witness to the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3), so it’s a life-or-death matter that we handle the word of truth rightly (2 Timothy 2:15). I think it’s primarily the pastor’s task to teach others how to understand the Bible and apply it to the details of their lives, and to nurture a growing ability and passion for handling God’s word themselves.

I believe the normal expectation in the Bible is that the power of preaching and teaching will be seen over the long haul as the Holy Spirit works on our hearts week-by-week, year-by-year. So my approach to preaching and teaching shouldn’t be dictated by the presence or absence of immediate, public transformation. I would imagine this is a challenge for most pastors. It certainly is for me, so I pray for patience and faith to trust that God is ever at work through the humble, faithful, clear, passionate proclamation of his word.

At the same time, the prophets and apostles throughout Scripture consistently called for an immediate response of repentance and faith, and sometimes it happened in incredible power. So
I pray for the Lord to anoint and empower my preaching in that way as well. Like any other act of worship, preaching and teaching is an offering to God for him to use for his good pleasure, and I’m learning to rest in his perfect providence.

Vision & Leadership
Nehemiah 2:11-18

In every person and in every church there are walls that are broken down. We are fallen, sinful people in imperfect congregations, and I think the calling to pastoral ministry is in some ways similar to Nehemiah’s call to rebuild the crumbled walls of Jerusalem. Like Nehemiah, we pastors should spend a lot of intentional time looking and listening, examining and thinking, praying and seeking to understand the multi-layered life situations that are present in any church at any given time. Whatever they are, those are the contexts in which we are called to lead.

When the time is right, and when the Lord has given understanding and clarity, we must have the courage and conviction to stand before God’s people and call them to “rise up and build” toward a vision of life as disciples of Jesus Christ. I think good visionary leadership takes shape in all sorts of ways, from one-on-one conversations to leadership development to regular emphasis in preaching; and all are critical. Most importantly, though, I think the pastor must eat, sleep and breathe his vision. It has to be so clear and compelling to the pastor-leader that he is consistently transformed by it personally and is constantly discovering new applications of it in his own life and in the church.

Of course it’s also important that the vision itself is solid. If it breaks down because it’s too vague or too rigid or too anything, then it’s not helpful and probably does more damage than good. It has to be broad enough to include the full scope of Christian discipleship and narrow enough to give focus and direction to what life as a disciple of Jesus Christ looks like. I don’t think it has to be a pithy phrase or acronym or symbol, but it does need to be a big idea that the people of a church can understand and share. More than that, it should be something they want to understand and share.

At this point it’s probably helpful to speak specifically about Crossroads. I’ve been at the church for almost four years, so there’s been some time for examining the walls and thinking about where I sense the Lord would have us rise up and build. To be sure, I haven’t come to any conclusions in isolation. My thoughts about Crossroads have been shaped alongside the elders, pastors, other leaders and our membership in general. So I claim no credit for being original, but I do hope I’m able to articulate our context in a way that puts words to what many of us are feeling.

In short, our desire for this season is that we would grow in 1) how we relate to others and 2) how we respond to the Bible. So we came up with a vision that focuses on Relational Connection and Biblical Transformation (RC::BT) In many ways, these are areas where every disciple of Jesus has always had room to grow, starting with Peter and Andrew, and on down the line to us. So the vision is broad and includes how we relate to others in every sphere of life (home, work, neighborhood, etc). Specific to Crossroads, these are areas of particular concern given the recent history and culture of our church. So the vision is also narrow, particularly as it applies to our church life.

RC::BT inside the walls of Crossroads
We all know God has brought Crossroads into a difficult season over the last several years, and it’s only natural that it’s brought various degrees of discouragement to many people who love the church. As a collective response to this season of pruning, my hope and prayer is that we will increasingly rally together in grace and forgiveness by intentionally reaching out to one another in humility and love like Christ reaches out to us. The enemy surely wants to divide us over our
differences. But I believe God’s purpose is to use our differences to transform us, unite us, and make us instruments of his grace to transform the lives of our friends, neighbors and community.

**RC::BT outside the walls of Crossroads**

Another key aspect of our church life where I think the vision applies is in the relational connections we pursue with the community around us. As noted in our church profile, we changed locations in 2003 from the middle of a Libertyville neighborhood to an unincorporated area of Lake County. While our address changed, I think most of us realize our approach to outreach has largely stayed the same, and there is a strong need presently for a new vision for how to connect with our region.

Personally, I like where we are geographically, and I’m glad we moved. I think the strategic opportunities for the gospel are greater in many ways on Highway 137 than on Winchester Road. We just have to learn to build new relational bridges to connect with our new community. This will sound cheesy, but I think we need widespread RC for the purpose of widespread BT. The early church at Corinth was right on a main trade route in its day, and the Lord was pleased to spread his Kingdom in strategic ways through that church’s particular location. My prayer is that God will do the same through Crossroads.

**Pastoral Care & Encouragement**

Acts 20:28; Matthew 10:5-8; Proverbs 18:1-2,13-14

Paul taught the Ephesian elders to pay careful attention to themselves and to the flock over which the Holy Spirit made them overseers. They were to care for the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.

Jesus sent out the twelve apostles to the lost sheep of Israel to encourage them by proclaiming the nearness of God’s kingdom and to minister to their physical and spiritual needs.

In keeping with passages such as these, I believe the personal ministry of the pastor among the people he’s called to serve is like the third leg of a stool. Without it, even the finest preaching and strongest leadership would be unbalanced and ultimately unable to stand. In Christ and through the Holy Spirit, God cares for us intimately and personally, and as his ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) I think the pastor’s calling is to do the same. Only as he comes to know and love the actual people of the church personally (not just generically) and identifies with their needs does the pastor earn the right to lead them and feed them as their shepherd.

As a young pastor, I recognize I have much room for growth in every area of pastoral ministry, but probably none more so than in the ministry of pastoral care. Some of that is a result of my personality; but more than that, I think it just takes time and life experience to grow in empathy and compassion for the range of life situations represented in the church. It also takes wisdom, which is why I find so much help (and conviction!) from Proverbs when it comes to how I relate to people.

Proverbs 18:2 & 13 encourage me to take pleasure in hearing and understanding a person or situation, rather than rushing to express my opinion. Verse 14 helps me see the reason why. It is because my calling as a Christian, and especially as a pastor, is to be a channel for God to breathe life into the spirits of others, not to crush them. “A man’s spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?” I pray for the wisdom, gentleness and grace to bring joy to the people of the church, not discouragement.

In practical terms, I like the idea of following in the pattern of the Puritan pastor, Richard Baxter, who made regular visits to the home of every church member for the purpose of pastoral care. He was determined to pay careful attention to his flock (Acts 20:28), and he organized his life to
make it happen. I think there are ways, especially in a church with a plurality of elders like Crossroads, to do this kind of personal ministry in our day too. We've actually already begun to do this by meeting in the homes of new member candidates as part of the membership process, and it's proving to be meaningful and encouraging.

As a church grows, it becomes less practical for one man to connect personally to every member, so I think it's critical to develop a structure where the ministry of pastoral care can be spread among many shepherds. This is important for reasons beyond just church growth. One reason is that the one man will not always be there. Whether a pastor serves for five years or fifty, I think his mission is not to build a kingdom that will fall when he leaves because it's dependent on him. Christ is our only permanent shepherd, and he works through his body collectively. So I think real, permanent pastoral care is a ministry that models it, equips lay elders to join in it, and encourages every member to look not only to his or her own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4) as they care pastorally for one another.

As I think back to Acts 6:4, I'm reminded again that the broad framework for these tasks of pastoral ministry roots them in prayer and in the Bible. That helps me. We all have a tendency to drift toward laboring in our own strength, and I'm no exception. So by God's grace and the accountability of others, my desire is grow more and more dependent on God to do his work as I focus on my calling to submit to him in a life of prayer and to humbly declare his word without compromise in every task of ministry.

The Personal Life of the Pastor

Setting an example of godliness {1 Timothy 4:6-12; Luke 6:40}

Paul instructed Timothy to set an example for the believers in his words and actions, his love and faith, and his purity. Even though Timothy was relatively young he was not to shrink back from his role as an example, and I take that as a charge to me personally. For the sake of his Kingdom, God is calling me to keep a close watch on all those areas and to train myself for godliness.

Part of that training, for sure, is recognizing that a life of godliness is not an individual enterprise for me or anyone else. Godliness doesn't happen in a silo or an ivory tower. It happens in a network of family and church and others who function together as the body of Christ for the sake of my soul. So, as a pastor, I need more than just a mission and vision to pursue for the church, I need to pursue a mission and vision for myself and for my family as well. In fact, those have to come first (1 Timothy 3:4-5).

Personal mission and vision

Christ's commission in Matthew 28:18-20 is not just for the church collectively, I think it's for every disciple individually as well. So my personal mission as a Christian is to make disciples wherever God puts me, whether I'm a pastor or a plumber or an opera singer.

Part of the reason I'm so taken with RC::BT is that it helps me evaluate how I'm doing as a disciple of Jesus and how I'm seeking to disciple my family and others in my spheres of influence. Like most people, my natural daily mode is to interact with people on surface level without really relating to them on a heart level. That's not being a disciple or a disciple maker. So I've got to make intentional decisions every day to think deeper thoughts about others and ask them better questions and listen more intently to their answers. I've got to choose to be missional by pursuing real relational connections on a heart level with every one in my life, and I'm finding that the more I do, the more Christ transforms my heart by giving me a capacity to love people the
way he does (John 15:13). So in a very real way, every relational connection is an opportunity for biblical transformation, both in me and in others.

It also works the other way. The more I learn to believe God's word that he is working all things for my good (Romans 8:28), and the more I place my daily hope in that promise (Colossians 1:21-23), the more I'm freed from fixating on my selfish desires (James 1:15), and I have room in my heart to care about somebody else (Philippians 2:4). In other words, when biblical transformation happens in my heart, relational connections happen in my life.

Over the last two years of meditating on these two ideas (RC::BT), my life is changing in significant ways. I'm growing as a disciple and as a disciple maker in areas that had been stagnant before, and I'm excited about it.

Family mission and vision

About a year ago our small group read and discussed a book called, *The Three Big Questions for a Frantic Family*, by Patrick Lencioni. The point of the book is to help couples think through their unique values and goals for their family, and it included several exercises to help discover and clarify the kinds of things we don't stop to think about in the daily hubbub of life. Dina and I spent considerable time working through the exercises and, in the end, found it very helpful for articulating something like a mission and vision for our family.

We are a passionate, all-in family that seeks to impact our community and our world by living the gospel in our everyday relationships and seeking authentic friendships with other families, both inside the church and out. We love active, outdoor recreation and seek to cultivate an appreciation for God's creativity in the world around us. Right now our young children love to read and talk about the Bible together, so we're working to sustain and nurture that appetite through regular discussions about specific ways the Bible makes us wise.

The Relationship between the Pastor and the Church

There are number of word pictures in the New Testament that describe the various relational dimensions of pastoral ministry. In my experience there are few things more helpful in the middle of a difficult situation than being reminded of one of these images. The three analogies below all continue to form and shape my thoughts, actions and feelings as I'm learning more and more of what it means to be a pastor.

Nurturing like a parent  {1 Thessalonians 2:5-8}

Sometimes siblings fight. I expect that as a parent. Hardly a day goes by in the Hanbury home without cries of pain and shouts of accusation. Someone has always been wronged, and kids make sure that no bad deed goes unpunished, or at least they won't go down without a fight. It's their nature.

Sometimes I get mad at them, and I want to act just like they do. It would feel good to scream my brains out and start throwing punches, or kick them out the door and lock it behind them. But because I'm the parent, I can't do that. For one, it's my job to keep the peace. If I start adding to the chaos, it's hopeless. I've also got to protect them from each other. But more than either of those things, my love for the kids and my desire to help them grow and learn constrains me to handle them more gently. As their parent, my kids' well being is one of my primary concerns in life. I'm jealous for their good, and I'll do just about anything to take care of them. Just like any good parent.
Sometimes brothers and sisters in the church fight or bully or argue. Someone says or does something that somebody else doesn't like, and people get hurt and want to hurt others in return. Unlike kids, usually the offense is unintentional, but the wounds are real and the emotions can be strong. When I see that happening, or when it happens to me, it can be hard not to jump into the fray and fight back. But my nurturing role as a pastor compels me to react differently, and 1 Thessalonians 2:7 has helped me see that.

In difficult situations, especially when tempers flare, it's helpful to remember to think and act like a parent and treat everyone with gentleness, kindness and perspective. Sometimes there does need to be firmness too, but always grace and love, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.

**Guiding like a shepherd  {Jeremiah 3:15; 1 Peter 5:1-3}**

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God promised to give his people shepherds after his own heart who will feed them with knowledge and understanding. With the coming of the Good Shepherd and his apostles after him, God kept his promise and continues to keep it as he raises up new shepherds for every generation of his Church. As perhaps the first church elder (Matthew 16:16-18), the apostle Peter summarizes the shepherding role of the pastor as exercising oversight willingly and eagerly without seeking power or personal gain.

Building on both these texts, Tim Witmer, a current pastor and author of *The Shepherd Leader*, has applied these biblical passages in a way that's helped frame my thinking about how to carry out my shepherd role as a pastor. Witmer focuses on four areas:

**Knowing the Sheep**
This ministry begins with knowing who's in the "pen." It places a high value on membership as the practical means of knowing who it is for whom the pastor will give account before God (Hebrews 13:17). Beyond that, it stresses the importance of knowing the corporate personality of the church, it's culture and unique circumstances, as well as building personal relationships with the individual members of the church.

**Feeding the Sheep**
This informs the preaching and teaching ministry of the pastor by placing it in context of shepherding from both the Old and New Testaments. I am to preach and teach in a way that is spiritual food for the church. My concern must never be simply to declare truth for truth's sake, but to apply it to our lives in a way that nourishes our souls and gives us spiritual (and sometimes physical) strength.

**Leading the Sheep**
A shepherd goes before the flock, facing enemies first and walking the paths they are to walk. Again, this casts light on the tasks of pastoral ministry. The corporate vision and leadership, as well as the personal example set by the pastor, are to be exercised willingly and eagerly, not under compulsion or for personal gain. Peter says exercise oversight "as God would have you."

**Protecting the Sheep**
Both publicly and privately, the faithful pastor will be protective of the church by recognizing and confronting the "wolves" that endanger our faith (Acts 20:29) and refuting those who contradict sound doctrine (Titus 1:9). Sometimes those dangers are from outside the church, like cultural influences and temptations. Sometimes they are from within the church, like when Christians quarrel and fight (James 4:1-2). Still other times they are from within our own hearts and minds, like when we shift our hope to things other than the gospel (Colossians 1:23) to our own spiritual peril. You had to know I was going to work in shifty hopes somewhere!
Building like a laborer  {1 Corinthians 3:5-11}

My favorite part of preaching is how much I learn and grow through digging into the Bible. Several months ago, I preached one sermon on 1 Corinthians 3 with no inkling that I would come away with my philosophy of ministry profoundly impacted.

In this chapter, Paul is trying to help the Corinthian Christians see the incredible standing they have before God as his Church in order to stop them from arguing over which teacher they follow. He tells them, “let no one boast in men, for all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). In other words, don’t fuss over which teacher you belong to because you don’t belong to any of them. They all belong to you!

The pastor’s ministry is the possession of the church, not the other way around. That’s why Paul says “neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth . . . for we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Corinthians 3:7,9). And he doesn’t stop there. In verses 16 & 17 he says, “do you not know that you are Gods’ temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

In my zeal and passion for what I want to see the church become, it’s very easy for me to take too much personal ownership of who we are and what we’re doing. There’s also a strong temptation to think of my ministry as the “building” itself, confusing the temporary place of pastoral ministry with the permanent place of the church. But that could not be farther from reality.

The truth is that, just as with any construction project, the builder and the laborers do their work for a season, and when it’s done they are gone and soon forgotten. What remains is the fruit of their work, the building. If they’ve done good work, it will show in the quality of the building. If not, another laborer will be called in to make repairs. In the end, it doesn’t really matter who those men are. What matters is the strength of the building.

By God’s grace, I want to do outstanding work building on the foundation Christ has laid for his church through the laborers who’ve gone before.

Whoever becomes the next senior pastor of Crossroads Church, the likelihood is that he will come and go just like every pastor before him, and the church will be here long after he is gone. When that day comes, if the Lord has granted me the privilege of serving here, I will want to stand before him and hear, “well done” (Matthew 25:21).