**The Pastor’s Primary Responsibility**

(**The Local Church’s Primary Role**)

By Charles Strong

**Preface**

This is not an easy topic to address for several reasons. First because it intrudes on grounds for which there is a proliferation of professionals in the field that are capable of extensive judgments regarding the issue that are based upon field-experience. Second because the charge of “being presumptuous” will likely be charged to the author, who has had limited experience as a pastor of a local church, especially when compared to most other long-time ministers. And third because there are many well-written books on the subject, which are judged as complete on the subject and which do not isolate a single factor as being more important than others. The author is also aware of “over-the-deep-end” criticism that many will hurl his way due to this treatise, which simply will have to be.

All of the above may be true, but this study/commentary is not based solely upon anyone’s experiences in the field, the author’s or any others, although it is born from extensive observations in various local assemblies in many different locals. And although there may be extensive material on the subject existing in the world of script, it is this author’s experience and belief that the primary duty of the pastor and the local church has not been adequately addressed anywhere, at least not from an exclusively biblical prospective.

And this is the crux of the issue. There is really only one standard that can and must provide the foundation for a determination in the matter. There is only one sure authority that establishes the pastor’s primary authority and the local church’s primary role. The authority is the canonized Scriptures—the Word of God. The determination of this study stems from field experience under light of Scripture. Furthermore, while this author freely recognizes that the pastor and the local church has many obligations, this study is concerned with what he believes is the one upon which God has placed *top priority*. The author also realizes that this document may not be applicable to pastors and local churches that are in line with God’s Word regarding the issue.

**The Premise**

The primary responsibility of the pastor and the local church is to *make disciples* and not just shallow converts throughout the world, a procedure that is directly proportional to the resolute and intense teaching of systematic and thematic Bible doctrine. Yet many churches and pastors, either through ignorance of God’s Word or by influence of tradition and associative persons and assemblies or in laziness, are content to maintain a nursery of spiritual infants.

Such pastors and churches relegate instruction in Bible doctrine to a brief session in what is called “Sunday school” each week, usually a period of one hour or less, while scheduling over three times this amount of time for services that feature other, but much less important, spiritually related matters. And even in such “Sunday school” sessions, a believer is fortunate if two-thirds or three-fourths of the scheduled hour is truly devoted to methodical Bible teaching. And those individuals selected to administer doctrinal lessons within Sunday schools are at times not chosen for their devotion to and knowledge of Bible doctrine, since weekly lessons are provided by a pre-programmed quarterly that obviates such, including the value of “waiting upon the Lord” for direction in the weekly lessons. Although these weekly lessons may touch on key theologies, most often there is presented little depth in such biblical doctrines of Bibliology, Soteriology, Angelology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology, Christology, Pneumatology, and more.

The consequence for this lopsided prioritization of time and energy is the proliferation of congregations that are ignorant of the “meat” of God’s Word, excepting only those few individuals who take it upon themselves to study Bible doctrine in order to show themselves approved unto God. With such churches composed of believers who are satisfied to gauge their spiritual worth according to two or three moralistic homilies (in some cases no more than psychological pep-talks) each week, is it any wonder that personal carnality, worldliness, and “legalism-spirituality” rules in Christendom today? Is it any wonder that so few Christians are fervent in bringing the gospel of Christ to the lost world? Is it any wonder that in these “last days” there is such apostasy in and out of today’s churches? Is it any wonder that “spiritual-lukewarm” conditions prevail both in and out of today’s pulpits?

Today’s church member may be aware of the “milk” of God’s salvation, i.e., the justification of the spirit based *on faith alone in Christ alone*; but is quite ignorant of the “meat” of God’s salvation, i.e., the salvation of the soul (Gk: life) through spiritual perseverance and which will have crucial import at the Judgment Seat of Christ and in the coming Kingdom Age. He may understand that Christ died on the cross, but with no true understanding of what this sacrifice affords the believer, e.g., justification, redemption, imputation, expiation, reconciliation, regeneration, propitiation, sanctification, and glorification. He understands to some degree the Gospel of Grace but fails to differentiate it from the Gospel of the Kingdom, which leads to flawed interpretations of many passages within God’s Word. He may in fact know that the Bible contains prophecy but has no comprehension that fully one-third of the entire Bible is prophetic, not to mention his lack of any grasp of the prophecies and how they relate to believers and the world in these “last days.” He stands with those of whom the author of Hebrews said:

*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.* (Hebrews 5:12-14)

This is in fact the case. And it can be attributed directly to the dearth of teaching Bible doctrine, both in the pulpit and in other forums set by pastors and churches today. And surely this should not be, since this concept of spiritual shepherding by both pastors and churches has ample foundation in God’s Word.

On the contrary, there is ample evidence versed by both Jesus Christ and His apostles that the priority of the Christian experience must be centered in comprehensive Bible-doctrine consumption and teaching. In fact, the Bible routinely teaches that the primary ministry of any pastor, and in-deed all Christians, is not only to learn in depth God’s Word, but to teach it to others in order that all “born again” ones may become spiritually mature Christians.

**The Evidence**

By Christ

It is both fascinating and sadly paradoxical that most pastors and Bible teachers fail to understand the thrust of the Great Commission, as was given by the post-resurrection Christ to His disciples on the mountain.

*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples* [Gk: *matheteuo*] of *all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching* [Gk: *didasko*] *them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:18-20)

Usually when a minister expounds this command of Christ, which was made to the remaining eleven of His apostles (and thereby to every Christian), he sees it only as a decree for Christians to be “soul-winners,” i.e., to tell the lost how to be “saved” or “born (again) from above.” To be sure, this step is included and assumed for any person of mature age, both in the physical or spiritual realm, since no one can achieve such stature without a beginning (birth).

Yet the crucial meaning of the Great Commission is to *make disciples* of all persons in the nations, not just simply to “get them saved.” The word Christ used is *matheteuo*, a Greek word meaning “to instruct with the purpose of making a disciple.” It must be distinguished from the verb *matheo* (or *manthano*), which simply means to learn without any attachment to the teacher. *Matheteuo* means not only to learn, but to become attached to one’s teacher and to become his follower in doctrine and conduct of life. In this sense it is akin to *mathetes*, which represents more than a mere pupil or learner. It is an adherent who accepts the instruction given to him and makes it his rule of conduct, e.g., the disciples of John (Matthew 11:2; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33; 7:18; John 3:25), the disciples of the Pharisees (Mark 2:18), and the disciples of Christ who believed and made His teachings the basis of their conduct (Matthew 5:1; 8:23, 25; 9:10; 11:1; 14:22).

Therefore what Christ is specifically and forcefully charging His immediate disciples and all Christians to do is to produce *spiritually mature* children of God throughout the entire world. This very specific goal is reinforced when he further says, “*teaching* *them to observe all things that I have commanded you*.” Here Christ uses the Greek word *didasko*, which has in it the inherent quality to “influence the understanding of the person who is taught toward a specific objective or end.” And that “end” is a *spiritually mature* child of God. And this goal can *only* be accomplished by *teaching* all of God’s Word, i.e., Bible doctrine—the “meat” of the Word, which far surpasses the “milk” of most preaching and Sunday school lessons in the local churches of today.

But the emphasis of this very specific goal is nowhere better expressed by Christ than in his discourse with the apostle Peter during the third time He showed Himself to the apostles, which was beside the Sea of Tiberias and just after the object lesson of feeding them a breakfast of bread and roasted fish.

*So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love* [Gk: *agapao*] *Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love* [Gk: *phileo*] *You.” He said to him, “Feed* [Gk: *bosko*] *My lambs* [Gk: *arnion*]*.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love* [Gk: *agapao*] *Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love* [Gk: *phileo*] *You.” He said to him, “Tend (Shepherd)* [Gk: poimaino] *My sheep* [Gk: probaton]*.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love* [Gk: phileo] *Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love* [Gk: phileo] *Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love* [Gk: phileo] *You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed* [Gk: *bosko*] *My sheep* [Gk: *probaton*]*.”* (John 21:15-17)

Parishioners usually hear sermons on this passage involving an exegetical exposition of the use of the Greek words for “love” as used in the exchange between Christ and Peter, but not often on the analysis of the words: “feed,” “lambs,” “shepherd,” and “sheep.” It is these words that primarily enforce the premise herein.

As to the use of the two Greek words translated “love” in this passage, Christ twice used the word *agapao*, which is a completely unselfish love for the sake of meeting another’s need; while Peter always used the word *phileo*, which conveys the thought of being a friend of someone and consequently to adopt the same interests as the one befriended. In the end, Christ yielded to Peter’s term for love, perhaps to settle for whatever depth of love Peter felt himself capable of giving. Peter’s ability, or lack of it, would of course in no way hamper or change Christ’s love (John 3:16—Gk: *agapao*) for Peter. But aside from these types of love, the Lord was endeavoring to convey to Peter a specific message that alone would validate Peter’s love for Him.

The bottom line of Christ’s message to Peter was that if Peter truly loved Him (either *agapao* or *phileo*), his primarily responsibility was to do three things, as follow:

1) Feed the lambs of Christ.

2) Shepherd the sheep of Christ.

3) Feed the sheep of Christ.

Christ metaphorically was telling Peter that his love would best be expressed in his feeding (teaching) of Bible doctrine to both the immature (lambs or newly saved) and more mature (sheep) children of God. Additionally, the parallel sentence structure of this passage, either equates teaching Bible doctrine as the revealed meaning of “shepherding” (tending to all concerns of care) or as the most important feature of it.

Jesus Christ earnestly desires the development of sanctified (Gk meaning: “set apart” or “holy” or “spiritually mature”) believers, not simply “babes in Christ” who have no spiritual depth. The reason is because *only* spiritual mature Christians bring great honor to God, and they also are the *only* ambassadors of God that are truly effective in bringing the lost to a saving relationship with Him (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 2:2). And it is *only* through God’s truth (His Word) that a child of God is able to spiritually grow and achieve these ends; witness the words of Christ as He prays to the Father for His disciples:

*Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.* (John 17:17)

The apostle Paul confirms that this is the primary objective of Christ for the Church (all believers), having loved her and having given Himself for her “*that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish* (Ephesians 5:26-27).

Furthermore, there are ample scriptural passages that convey that pastors and local churches must designate intense and comprehensive teaching of God’s Word as *top priority*—over and above *ad hoc* milk-toast preaching or any other spiritually related activity.

By Others

The following scriptural passages from both the Old and New Testament, if seriously considered, should convince the reader that God’s interest in the intense and inclusive teaching of His Word (i.e., the “feeding of His sheep”) is the one spiritual activity that deserves the highest position on the hierarchy “shepherding” scale for pastors and local churches. The author has decided to allow the following passages to stand alone without individual comment, since their clarity and intent are sufficient to convince a heart in genuine quest of spiritual truth. *Note: All underlining is by the author.*

*And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding*. (Jeremiah 3:15)

*“I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking,” says the LORD.* (Jeremiah 23:4)

*Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: ‘Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock.’”* (Ezekiel 34:2-3)

*I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them—My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd.* (Ezekiel 34:23)

*But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. . . . However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.* (John 15:26; 16:13)

*How I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house. . . . For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.* (Acts 20:20, 27-28)

*So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the Word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.* (Acts 20:32)

*Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.* (1 Corinthians 14:20)

*The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints*. (Ephesians 1:18)

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—Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-15)

Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.(Colossians 1:28)

*A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach*. (1 Timothy 3:2)

*These things command and teach*. (1 Timothy 4:11)

*Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables*. (2 Timothy 4:2-4)

*Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly.* (1 Peter 5:2)

**The Conclusion**

There can be only one conclusion. The primary responsibility of the pastor and the local church is to systematically and thoroughly teach the Word of God—Bible doctrine. All other church and pastoral activities must take second place to this activity. Yes, worship services are okay, although to truly worship God, which is to express one’s love for Him, one must place priority on the consumption and detailed teaching of His Word. Song festivals are fine and their basis is biblical, but never should they be considered equivalent or substitutionary for the teaching of Bible doctrine. Prayer meetings and visitation programs are scriptural, but never as necessary as programs of instruction in Bible doctrine.

Pastoral and church leadership should carefully examine the allotment of time assigned for all church activities. If the preponderance of time is not for the comprehensive and intense exposition of God’s Word, the leadership is not honoring the clear instruction of Jesus Christ and the example evidenced by the apostles in the New Testament. With many local churches, which employ a Sunday school hour and two “worship” services on Sundays and one “prayer meeting” or “worship” service on one other night of the week; it is suggested that the Sunday school hour could be extended to two hours along with one worship service on Sunday morning, a one or two-hour Bible study service on Sunday night, and a one or two-hour Bible study service one other time during the week. This then would be more in-line with the Word of God.

Other Bible study classes held in individual homes during other times during the week should also be considered. Actually, such sessions are usually much more conducive to learning Bible doctrine as well as cementing biblical-loving connections between believers.

It is recognized that these suggestions will not be popular with the “run-of-the-mill” local church or many pastors. But even small and incremental realignments of time and function toward the mission of Bible instruction would be better than the status quo. Such change or changes will then enable the leadership of the local church to better proclaim alone with the apostle Paul:

*Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.* (Colossians 1:28)

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