

## **The Nature and Challenges of Pastoral Ministry: Introduction to the Course**

- **The Nature of the Gospel**
- **The Pastor Brings the Gospel to Others as an Ambassador of Reconciliation**
- **The Goal of Pastoral Work: Helping People to**
  - **Know Jesus Christ as a Risen Savior**
  - **Receive the Forgiveness of Sins**
  - **Be Reconciled to God and to Others**
  - **Experience Inner Freedom and Healthy Intimacy, Growing in Faith, Hope and Love**

To explain why certain topics are addressed in this course, it might be best to back up one step and talk about *what it means to be a pastor*.

Once we have understood what Scripture teaches about this, then it will be easier to go back and explain what topics needed to be discussed in this course and why.

First of all, *a pastor is defined by the Gospel*; it is the Gospel that shapes and defines our ministry.

Often there is so much going on in the church that the basic and essential Gospel becomes cluttered with other things, like how to be a moral middle-class person or how to have a prosperous, happy life.

Once we strip away all the add-ons and all the clutter, *the underlying Gospel can be stated quite simply*. Perhaps the easiest way of doing this is to look at the public explanations of the Gospel that are given in the book of Acts. Although there is some variation in how the Gospel is presented, all of these explanations of the Gospel seem to have the following common elements:

- (1) There is one true and living God;
- (2) We were wrong to turn away from God and place our hope and trust in something else;
- (3) A time of truth and judgment is coming;
- (4) In this judgment our neglect of God and resistance to God will be exposed and condemned;
- (5) To save us from this judgment, God has sent His Son Jesus into the world;
- (6) Jesus has stood in our place and, by his death, has taken on himself the judgment that was coming against us because of our wrongdoing.
- (7) We are now asked to make a sharp break with our past God-denying, God-rejecting life and to place all our trust and hope in Jesus, the Son of God.

From this summary, it is clear that the *Gospel and pastoral ministry start from the assumption that people are away from God, that they are sinners, and that they need to be reconciled to God*.

When we study the public explanations of the Gospel in the book of Acts, we also notice a second thing: *God seeks to reconcile the world to himself by working through ordinary, weak human beings*.

- Although God could have acted directly from heaven, he chose to bring salvation to the world by sending His Son to take on a fully human life, with all its weakness and temptation.

- Even after Jesus is raised from the dead, God continues to use ordinary people to communicate the Gospel and reconcile people to himself.
  - 2 Cor. 5:20: “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, *as though God were making his appeal through us*. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.”
  - Rom. 10:13-15a: “‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? *And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?*

So, in conclusion, *helping people turn from their sins and be reconciled to God* lies right at the heart of pastoral ministry.

If you will turn to page 14 of the course syllabus, let’s look at how we are going to develop and explore this.

If we want to help people turn from their sins, we will need to discuss

- what true repentance looks like;
- what incomplete or false repentance looks like;
- *how to work with people privately to help them gain insight and move from false or incomplete repentance to true repentance;*

This is what we are going to cover next week on September 16.

Now if we are going to meet privately with people to help them work through repentance, obviously we are going to end up knowing a lot about people’s private lives, including ways they have denied God and hurt people.

- If these private facts about their lives became public, other people would think badly of them, be angry with them, want to see them denounced and punished.
- So if we want to meet with people privately and help them move toward repentance, we will need to make sure that what they say in private remains private and confidential.
- If people do not feel they can trust us, they will not ask for help and may have difficulty working through repentance and reconciliation to God and other people they have hurt. They will act instead out of shame and fear and will believe lies from the Evil One.

Because *trust* and *confidentiality* are such an important part of pastoral work, we will discuss these on September 23 (see p. 15 of syllabus).

In helping people work toward reconciliation, the person we are meeting with will often describe ways they have been wronged. Although they may take some responsibility for their own behavior, they cannot forgive other people’s behavior. This raises a question about what can or should be forgiven and why.

- Are there things other people have done that really can’t and shouldn’t be forgiven?
- Should we require other people to feel sorry for what they did before we can forgive them?
- And what should “forgiving them” mean anyway after they did unforgiveable things?

What forgiveness and reconciliation are (and are not) will be discussed on September 30 (p. 15 of syllabus).

Between October 7 and November 11, we will look at ways pastors can remain well in ministry and also why pastors can decline into emotional and spiritual ill-health and hurt the very people they are supposed to care for. In my view, this is the most important part of this course and that's why most of the course assignments are linked to these topics.

If you are in your 20's or early 30's, you may have an easy confidence in yourself and your ministry, but after you have been in ministry for 15 years, you will have watched a number of other pastors burn out, drop out, abuse power, or engage in sexual misconduct. Some of these pastors will be people who are your personal friends, people you work with, or people who served as mentors or models for your own ministry.

- In pastoral work, we never stay in one place; we are always moving either toward health or away from health.
- We cannot minister out of emotional and spiritual ill health and have a healthy ministry.
- None of us will ever be free of weakness, troubles and failure, but we can always choose to pursue healing. No matter how far one has fallen, God always keeps the way open for us to return to health.

On October 7 (pp. 15-16 of syllabus), we will look at the importance of *friendship* and how the quality of one's friendships plays an important role in emotional and spiritual health and remaining in ministry.

On October 14 (pp. 16-17 of syllabus), we look at how *power* and *conflict* function within ministry.

- The way we understand and use power will fundamentally shape our ministry. We need to look at what kinds of power were (and were not) given to the pastor and how we can discern whether a pastor's/church's power is being used to build up or tear down.
- The way we understand and use power plays a big role in church conflicts.
- The way power is used also will determine whether the conflicts in the church can be resolved and whether the pastor will be forced to resign as a result of conflict in the church ("forced pastoral exit").

Between Oct. 21 and Nov. 11 (pp. 18-20 of syllabus), we will spend four weeks look at burnout and sexual misconduct in the church. What we will see is that if a pastor does not address burnout and continues to deteriorate, he or she will try to deal with this by crossing boundaries and seeking inappropriate and unhealthy forms of intimacy.

I will be frank with you and admit that some of the assigned material is difficult to read because it deals with people being betrayed and victimized. Still, it's important that you read it, so that you can understand and help people who have gone through these experiences.

Having looked at unhealthy intimacy, we conclude the course by looking at marriage and healthy forms of intimacy. After thinking through the Christian teaching on marriage (November 18; pp. 20-21 of syllabus), we will also look some of the challenges that marriages face in contemporary America, looking at factors that contribute to infidelity (December 2; p. 21 of syllabus) and divorce (December 9; pp. 21-22 of syllabus).