

Paul's Pastoral Method

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Prolonged study of 1 and 2 Thessalonians over the past two years has provided opportunity to examine Paul's approach to pastoral care in some depth. While these two letters are not usually classified as "pastoral epistles," they (like all of Paul's letters) are eminently pastoral in character. Indeed, it has been said of the second and third chapters of 1 Thessalonians, "In these chapters, more perhaps than anywhere else in his letters, he [Paul] discloses his mind, expresses his emotions and bares his soul."¹ The writer goes on to add, "No-one who is engaged in any form of pastoral ministry can fail to be touched and challenged by what Paul writes here."² They offer, then, a rich field to study the way Paul approached pastoral care.

The outstanding feature that emerges from such a study is the close connection between truth and life in Paul's pastoral method. His personal sense of mission, his goals and his methods, are all shaped by the gospel. He preaches because he has been entrusted with the gospel and he preaches openly and without guile because anything less would have been inconsistent with the gospel. He addresses problems in terms of the gospel because they are caused by failure to grasp the meaning of that gospel. At every point, Paul relates what he does to what he believes. His pastoral ministry is a gospel ministry.

It is this fact that makes a fresh look at Paul's pastoral approach so relevant. We live in a day of creative developments in the field of pastoral ministry, many of which appear to have little connection with the gospel. Their roots are rather in sociological, psychological and business theory and practice. Their disjunction from the gospel and from biblical theology removes them from any controlling biblical principles, and means that in the end pragmatic factors are the basis of their evaluation. Re-focusing Paul's approach to pastoral care highlights the perils of this course, provides a basis for evaluating modern developments, and re-establishes a foundation for developing effective spiritual shepherding.

The two papers in this series attempt to analyze the *method* Paul used to pastor his converts, and the *manner* in which he did so. Their overall objective is to provide a framework for pastors and church leaders today to develop gospel-based shepherding ministries in local churches. While growing out of the Thessalonian letters, they are not totally confined to them. 1 and 2 Thessalonians serve as the main source of ideas and illustrations, but reference is often made to the wider collection of Paul's letters.

I. Paul's Pastoral Perspective

Before plunging into an analysis of the methods Paul used to pastor churches we do well to reflect on where pastoral care fitted into his ministry. Was his continuing interest in the Thessalonian church, for example, something beyond his basic task, or did it belong to its essence? Was pastoral care something fundamentally different to gospel preaching for the apostle, something like a postgraduate exercise, or were the two more closely connected? In answering these questions we discover the key to Paul's approach to shepherding God's flock.

It becomes immediately apparent when reading letters like 1 and 2 Thessalonians that Paul didn't view his ongoing concern for young congregations as an adjunct to his basic ministry. Quite the contrary, it belonged to the heart and soul of his work. Clearly, he didn't consider that his task was completed when people came to faith. He wasn't, as one writer has put it, "a singly-focused evangelist" concerned only to win people to Christ.³ His mandate was to secure a people for the Lord from among

¹ Stott, *The Message of 1&2 Thessalonians*, p. 45

² Loc. cit.

³ Beasley-Murray, "Paul as Pastor", In: *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 654

the Gentiles who were obedient to the faith,⁴ a people who were an “offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”⁵ Elsewhere he says his goal was to “present everyone perfect in Christ.”⁶ This larger purpose necessarily called not simply for the initial preaching of the gospel, but for the continued care of converts.

This is entirely in keeping with Paul’s understanding that the salvation offered in the gospel was essentially eschatological in character. In our day, salvation is commonly thought of only in terms of the initial process of justification and forgiveness. We talk of people being “saved,” referring to the great change that takes place when a person believes. We think of this as the great event in their lives. From that point on, they can look to a future of dying and going to be with Christ in heaven. But for Paul, however, that point of entry into the new life, as significant and dramatic as it might be, is only the beginning of salvation. It is but the beginning of a process to be completed not at the believer’s death but at the Lord’s appearing. The gospel he preached was a gospel that reached its climax when the Lord Jesus, having subdued all his enemies under his feet, offered up the kingdom to the Father.⁷ His concern was that his converts might appear “blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father” in that day.⁸ His work wasn’t finished when he saw men and women come to faith. He set out to present them to Christ as a “chaste virgin,” and looked to the day when his spiritual children would be his crown and glory in the presence of Christ.⁹ With that in view, he labored with all the energy Christ provided to see them hold true to the faith and grow to maturity in Christ, “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”¹⁰

This passion to see his spiritual children mature in the faith highlights the fact that Paul’s pastoral concern was merely a continuation of his initial evangelistic work. His goal in the original gospel proclamation was to see people come to faith. His purpose in pastoral care was to see that faith secure and strengthened. When at his wits end with anxiety over the Thessalonians, the apostle chose to be left alone (abandoned, desolate) in Athens and sent Timothy back to the church to “strengthen and encourage” its members in their faith, and to “find out about” their faith.¹¹ Their faith in the gospel was the key thing. His pastoral care wasn’t concerned with anything new. He had nothing to add in essence to the gospel he had originally preached – no advanced course, no higher level of wisdom. His total purpose was to “bring to full flower the bud of the gospel.”¹²

This is how we are to understand Paul’s pastoral care. He was simply seeking to bring his converts into a fuller understanding of and more complete response to the gospel. All of his pastoral activities can be understood in this light. When problems arose in churches, they invariably did so because people were not understanding or living the gospel fully. His response was to teach them the gospel again, this time more pointedly and thoroughly, and with direct relevance to the problem issue at hand. This was true whether problems were doctrinal or ethical. Doctrine and life were all of a piece to Paul. They were intertwined in the gospel, or, as James Dunn has put it, they were “in each other.”¹³ As we shall see more fully later, the great redemptive facts of Christ’s death and resurrection commanded a necessary response of life that made the gospel not simply the way to eternal life, but the guide for present living. Ultimately, then, all pastoral nurture was a matter of teaching and applying the gospel.

This helps us understand why, at heart, pastoral ministry for Paul was essentially a teaching ministry. The problems and needs of individual Christians and church communities could always be traced back to the gospel, and to faith in that gospel. What was needed for growth towards maturity was a clearer

⁴ Rom. 1:5

⁵ Rom. 15:16

⁶ Col. 1:28

⁷ 1 Cor. 15:25-28

⁸ 1 Thess. 3:13

⁹ 2 Cor. 11:2 (A.V.), 1 Thess. 2:19,20

¹⁰ Col. 1:29, Eph. 4:13

¹¹ 1 Thess. 3:1,2,5

¹² Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds*, p. 100

¹³ Dunn, *A Theology of Paul*, p. 626

and stronger grasp of the gospel in all of its doctrinal and ethical implications, and a more complete appropriation of it in life. And how was that to be achieved? Fundamentally through teaching. “Knowledge,” writes Robert Banks, “is the vehicle through which faith comes into being and through which it is increased. Without knowledge there can be no genuine faith – only superstition on the one hand and speculation on the other.”¹⁴ Paul saw himself primarily as the agent of that knowledge, the gospel, and regarded his task as bequeathing its message, with all of its spiritual and ethical implications to the churches. This outlook, more than anything else, lay at the root of Paul’s pastoral method.

II. Paul’s Pastoral Practice

Paul’s ongoing activities in the churches he established were dictated, then, by a concern to see the gospel bearing its full fruit in the lives of people. It meant that where people were confused or ignorant concerning the gospel and its implications for life, he became their instructor. In cases where they were disheartened or flagging in zeal, he acted as their encourager, reminding them of what they already knew, supplementing it where necessary, and exhorting them to greater heights of obedience. And where they were erring or rebelling, he became their corrector. These three activities – teaching, encouraging, and correcting – conducted in an atmosphere of constant prayer, formed the hub of his pastoral practice. Together they remain the core tasks of pastoral ministry today.

This reinforces the idea mentioned above that teaching is central to the pastoral task. Above everything, Paul regarded himself a preacher and teacher of the truth. “His letters,” writes Tidball, “are permeated with the language of the classroom.”¹⁵ As has already been mentioned, he believed that teaching was the pathway to faith and maturity, and that necessarily meant that the Christian ministry was largely educational in design.¹⁶ Several features of his teaching method can be recognized from his letters.

i) It was practical rather than theoretical – Teaching for Paul was never an academic and cerebral matter divorced from the realities of life. This is because he didn’t view the gospel as an end in itself. Above all, it was the medium God used to bring about a radical reorientation in people’s lives. It was literally the power of God to salvation.¹⁷ It led to restored intimacy with God, and a transition from life dominated by sin and death to a life of grace and faith. Consequently, teaching the gospel invariably aimed at helping people live out this new life in the complex of their particular circumstances.¹⁸ It looked to promote holy living in its personal, corporate and social aspects. Given this, the close interplay of doctrine and practice in Paul’s letters shouldn’t surprise us. Doctrines are taught practically, and practical concerns are resolved doctrinally. Even the most extended expositions of gospel truth have practical ends in view. This explains why his teaching was always something more than just “highly developed verbal reasoning.” Separated from pastoral concerns, this kind of instruction becomes a cerebral and barren activity which fails to communicate the life of God to those who listen.¹⁹

ii) It was ethical as well as doctrinal – Closely connected with the above, Paul’s teaching invariably contained both doctrinal and ethical elements. Fundamentally, the gospel is good news about what God has done in his Son Jesus Christ. It centers in the death and resurrection event of the Lord Jesus, in his subsequent exaltation, reign and return, and in the gift of the Holy Spirit as the first fruits of the life of the age to come. In Paul’s ministry, the initial gospel proclamation always stressed these grand, historical realities. In a very real sense they can be said to form the hub and substance of his gospel²⁰. But they were certainly not all that he preached and taught. Paul rightly saw that these great facts contained within them radical implications for those who believe them and are brought by them into living fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. He understood that through faith in the gospel, believers

¹⁴ Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, p. 72

¹⁵ Tidball, p. 107

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 107

¹⁷ Rom. 1:16

¹⁸ 1 Thess. 4:1f.

¹⁹ Tidball, p. 107

²⁰ 1 Cor. 15:3-4

are brought into union with Christ and come to share in his death, burial and resurrection.²¹ Their lives hidden with him in God in the heavenly realms,²² and they are indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus and called to live by the Spirit rather than their sinful nature.²³ Even now they are part of the new creation, the people of God of the age to come. And because of this, he saw that believers were to live in ways consistent with their new status. He can summarize the Christian life as “walking worthy of the gospel.”²⁴ In his first letter to the Thessalonians he recalls how he had lived among them encouraging, comforting, and urging them to “live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.”²⁵

The great gospel facts, then, had implications for life – the whole of life. And it was these implications that Paul teased out in his ethical exhortations. They were part of the “obedience that comes from faith”²⁶ that his gospel ministry aimed at. The practical instructions of his letters are never to be seen as something additional to the gospel – postgraduate instructions for the mature. They are the necessary implications of the great facts of the gospel. “Ethical behaviour” writes Mott, “is to correspond to what God has enabled them to be through Christ’s sacrifice.”²⁷ That’s why again and again Paul mingles ethical instructions with gospel doctrines. And that’s also why his admonitions never degenerate into legalistic do-lists. Stott has correctly pointed out that the church today shies away from ethical teaching, partly out of a fear of repelling people, and partly out of a concern to avoid the charge of being legalistic.²⁸ However, if we understand the relationship between the gospel facts and gospel living as Paul did, plain, practical ethical instruction will form an inseparable part of our gospel preaching and teaching.

iii) It was persuasive rather than coercive – One cannot help but be struck by the approach the apostle takes in his teaching ministry. It is marked above all things by his appeal to his reader’s understanding. He chooses to reason and think with people rather than imperiously command. He probes with questions, leads through arguments, appeals to present knowledge, and calls for deductions. “Usually,” Tidball writes, “he builds on what his readers already know, mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar, and leads them on from where they already are to develop their understanding further.”²⁹ He is not interested in fostering an uncritical, unthinking adherence to his formulae. He wants people to be mature in their understanding,³⁰ to recognize for themselves what it means to work out their new life in Christ. He doesn’t want them to be over-dependent upon himself or anyone else for that matter, but able to apply gospel truths themselves. He knew that it was only in this way that they would be able to become responsible for their own spiritual condition.³¹ But more than that, he believed that this was the approach to pastoral teaching demanded by the gospel. The gospel Paul preached was a gospel of freedom,³² especially freedom from the externally imposed chains of law. It wrote the law upon the heart and issued in glad, free, intelligent obedience to the Lord. To impose truth dogmatically and coerce obedience out of the fear of punishment would have been a betrayal of gospel freedom. Only teaching that aimed at obedience out of conviction and delight was consistent with the gospel. To quote Tidball again, “The gospel had called men to freedom and it would have been totally inconsistent to curtail that liberty by imposing new chains on them, even if Paul had manufactured the chains himself and believed them to be in the best interests of his converts. Freedom was of the essence of the gospel.”³³ Banks puts it this way: “Nothing is gained by conformity to his point of view unless they see the truth and embrace it for themselves. A nominal obedience does not result in any real growth in understanding or living.”³⁴

²¹ Rom. 6:3-4

²² Col. 3:1,2

²³ Rom. 8:9ff.

²⁴ Phil. 1:27

²⁵ 1 Thess. 2:12

²⁶ Rom. 1:6

²⁷ Mott, “Ethics,” in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* p. 269

²⁸ Stott, p. 76

²⁹ Tidball, p. 108

³⁰ 1 Cor. 14:20

³¹ Tidball, p. 113

³² Gal. 5:1

³³ Tidball, p. 114

³⁴ Banks, p. 181

iv) It was corrective as well as instructional – While Paul’s primary concern in teaching his converts was to build them up in their faith, he recognized that this called for correction and rebuke as well as positive instruction. Bringing people to maturity required both teaching and admonition (or correction).³⁵ This applied both to doctrinal error and aberrant practice. The Galatians are chided severely for flirting with another gospel, while the unruly elements in Thessalonica are rebuked for failing to work with their hands.³⁶ Usually, however, this corrective side of Paul’s teaching is a prelude to positive instruction. The central thrust of his teaching is not taken up with correcting the wayward as much as it is teaching the ignorant.³⁷

v) It was foundational rather than final – Paul was always aware of his unique position as an apostle of Jesus Christ. However, he did not consider that this gave him exclusive teaching rights within the Christian community. It did make him the authoritative and foundational source of teaching, but not its sole practitioner. On the contrary, it belonged to his strategy to have believers themselves able to teach others. He expected the Thessalonian Christians, for example, to “comfort one another” with the truths he taught, and complimented the Roman believers on their ability to instruct one another.³⁸ He wasn’t threatened by the emergence of teachers within congregations, but encouraged that to happen. This was because he recognized his role was that of a transmitter of the gospel tradition (paradosis). As its steward he was responsible to see it passed on to the churches, but having faithfully imparted it to them, others were to take up the task of preserving and promoting it.³⁹ Church member, he would agree, “can ably and legitimately engage in mutual instruction.”⁴⁰

vi) It was visual as well as verbal – A final point to note is Paul’s reliance upon personal example as well as verbal instruction in his pastoral care. His words had divine authority, and from that point of view were a sufficient basis for the faith and life of the churches. But he never considered them totally adequate vehicles for imparting truth. The new life of the gospel needed to be embodied in actions as well as taught in words. “Converts need both instruction in their new faith and concrete examples of how to embody their faith in the various contexts in which they find themselves” writes S. E. Fowl. “No amount of abstract verbal instruction can bring about mastery of a craft without the concrete example of a master to imitate.”⁴¹ For that reason, he repeatedly appeals to his own example. In the second letter to the Thessalonians, for example, he corrects resident loafers by reminding them and the congregation at large of his exhausting and self-sacrificing toil while living with them. This, he insists, was part of a deliberate plan to “make ourselves a model for you to follow.”⁴² In setting himself up in this way he is not acting arrogantly, as we might be inclined to think. We need to appreciate that the notion of imitating some sort of moral exemplar was quite common in the ancient world.⁴³ But we need also to realize that Paul was not encouraging a slavish imitation of every particular of his behaviour. He wanted people to imitate him as he imitated Christ. He called people to imitate him in as far as he lived the gospel. No doubt he has this in mind when he required that elders be “able to teach.”⁴⁴ He meant them to be able to do more than explain the truth clearly. They were to live it as well. “The power of example remains one of the most potent influences in men’s lives and is of crucial significance for the work of the pastor.”⁴⁵

As central as teaching was to Paul’s pastoral method, it did not stand alone. The apostle didn’t only teach the gospel in word, but actualized it, as it were, through prayer. So God-centred was his concept of missionary work that he knew that no amount of speaking and living on his part could in itself lead to conversions or spiritual growth. As W. B. Hunter puts it, “Paul’s life was lived in moment by moment consciousness of the eternal existence of a holy, sovereign God... It was impossible for the

³⁵ Col. 1:28

³⁶ Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Thess. 3:11-13

³⁷ Tidball, p. 108

³⁸ 1 Thess. 4:18; 5:11; Rom. 15:14

³⁹ 2 Tim. 2:2

⁴⁰ Tidball, p. 114

⁴¹ Fowl, “Imitation of Paul/Christ,” in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, p. 430

⁴² 2 Thess. 3:9

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 430

⁴⁴ 1 Tim. 3:2

⁴⁵ Tidball, p. 109

apostle to conceive of any human activity apart from God ... This totally theocentric world view fundamentally shaped Paul's life and prayer."⁴⁶ The apostle knew that God produced inward change through the Holy Spirit. The church was his creation, and he was its source of effective life. The fact that he used the gospel to accomplish that didn't guarantee results in every instance. The gospel became the operative power of God to save men only as the Holy Spirit used it. Aware of that, Paul knew that he needed to pray as well as preach. In the Thessalonian letters we find him constrained to thank God for the growth in faith, love and hope his converts show because he knows that it comes from God.⁴⁷ As he thinks of the coming of the Lord, he prays that the Lord himself will "strengthen their hearts" so they will be found holy and blameless before him at his appearing, and that he will work powerfully in them to "fulfill every good purpose... and every act prompted by faith."⁴⁸ And as he reflects on their need for ongoing change, he prays that God himself would sanctify them "through and through."⁴⁹ His ministry is conducted in an atmosphere of prayer born out of an awareness of the need for divine action for effective ministry. Preaching communicated the truths of the gospel to people while prayer sought the grace of God to transform people. The two belonged together in Paul's ministry, as they do in every pastoral ministry today.

Conclusion

Broadly, then, we may summarize Paul's pastoral method in this way. His dominating concern was to see men and women brought into a new relationship with God through the gospel. That relationship was created through the initial preaching of the gospel, and developed as its message and implications were more fully understood. That required that he respond to the deficiencies in the faith of his converts as they appeared in concrete historical circumstances by providing ongoing instruction, encouragement and correction, all by means of the truth of the gospel more fully explained and more penetratingly applied, and all in the context of constant prayer. In this way it can be seen that the church is truly created by the gospel, and shaped by the gospel. The pastoral ministry then, simply entails the fuller exposition and application of the gospel to the needs of people as they arise in their specific historical circumstances.

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⁴⁶ Hunter, "Prayer," in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, p. 730

⁴⁷ 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3

⁴⁸ 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 1:12

⁴⁹ 1 Thess. 5:23

Paul's Pastoral Manner

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This second paper examining Paul's approach to pastoral care seeks to explore his pastoral manner. Effective ministry, because it is inevitably ministry conducted within relationships, depends not only on *what* is done, but also on *how* it is done. For that reason, pastoral character and manner is no less important than pastoral strategy for effective shepherding of God's people today.

The central thesis of both papers in this series is that the gospel itself determines the nature of pastoral ministry. Pastoral ministry can be consistent with the inherent principles of the gospel and flow from them, or it can find its inspiration and forms in other sources. It is our contention that there is a special need to recapture a gospel-based foundation for pastoral practices today. Whatever benefits other approaches may appear to offer, they will be of little value unless anchored in the belief that "the gospel determines everything about the pastor – motives, authority, methods, and character are all governed by the good news of Jesus Christ."⁵⁰

The distinctive features of Paul's pastoral manner are diverse but can be summarized for our purposes broadly in terms of three qualities – *affection*, *transparency* and *openness*. A consideration of these three qualities, especially as they relate to the content of the gospel, provides a helpful framework for developing a biblical approach to the manner of pastoral care.

I. Affectionate

The most outstanding feature of Paul's relationships with the communities he founded was his affectionate care for them. He did not relate to them in a detached, professional way, but as one whose life was intimately wrapped up with theirs.⁵¹ This is demonstrated particularly by his use of images derived from the family to describe his relationship with his converts. Three of these are especially significant.

i) Foremost among these is the term "*brother*" – a term used 21 times in the Thessalonian letters alone. Rooted in the OT sense of community nurtured in Israel, this term was taken over by the NT church and used to reflect the intimate bonds between fellow members of the new family of God. Christians viewed each other as spiritual brothers and sisters, and related to each other with affection appropriate to this new status. Far from seeing himself above such a bond, the apostle delighted to recognize himself a member with his converts of that same divine family.

ii) In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul also uses the image of a "*mother*" or a "*nurse*" to depict the care with which he and his fellow missionaries had acted toward their new converts in that city.⁵² "We were gentle among you", he writes, "like a mother caring for her little children." The choice of the term "mother" accentuates the tender love Paul felt for those he had been used to bring to faith.⁵³

iii) In this same letter, he also describes his activity as that of a "*father*" among them. "For you know," he writes, "that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."⁵⁴ The choice of the father image relates not so much to his authority among them as to his special care for them and sense of responsibility for their spiritual instruction and growth.⁵⁵ Paul was careful to avoid any implication of ownership or privilege

⁵⁰ Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds*, p. 120

⁵¹ Stott, *The Message of Thessalonians*, p. 69

⁵² 1 Thess. 2:7

⁵³ Tidball, p. 106

⁵⁴ 1 Thess. 2:11,12

⁵⁵ Tidball, p. 105

in his use of parental images. He intended them simply to reflect the particular relations he had with them in the gospel, and his special love for them. He addressed them, as Banks writes, “as the father who conceived them, as the mother who bore them, and as the nurse who cared for them.”⁵⁶

This deep affection Paul felt for those he served in the gospel expressed itself in a number of different ways.

i) It made him *long to be present* with his converts, just as parents long to be with their children. He can speak of being violently “torn away”⁵⁷ from the Thessalonian believers when forced to leave the city, using words that reflect a sense of being orphaned. He then goes on to speak of his “intense longing for them”⁵⁸ and his ceaseless efforts to revisit them. The intense love he felt for his converts made any separation from them painful to bear, but this was especially so when young and vulnerable spiritual children were in view.

ii) It made him *avoid being a burden to them*.⁵⁹ Though entitled as an apostle to the support of those he preached to, Paul never demanded that right. On the contrary, he preferred to toil with his own hands night and day in order to provide the gospel ‘free of charge’ to people. While as an official representative (an apostle) was entitled to board and keep, as a father, Paul knew it was his duty to provide for his children rather than have them provide for him.⁶⁰

iii) It made him *sensitive to their particular and individual needs*. A striking feature of Paul’s pastoral care is his intimate knowledge of particular cases. He appreciated that there were different needs among the members of congregations. Among the Thessalonians, for example, he identified three ‘problem classes’ among his spiritual children – the ‘idle’ (or unruly), the ‘timid’ and the ‘weak.’⁶¹ Rather than issue blanket directions for all three classes, he reflects his insight and pastoral sensitivity by requiring that the idle be ‘warned’, the timid be ‘encouraged’, and the weak be ‘helped.’ Paul wanted to see every one of his converts attain spiritual maturity in Christ,⁶² and that meant adapting to the needs of individuals with a patience and care made possible only through a heart full of love.

iv) It made him *patient and gentle* in dealing with people. Interestingly, gentleness was not a greatly admired quality among philosophers and teachers in Paul’s day, as it is often not in our own. It was often equated with flattery, or with weakness, and generally regarded with a measure of contempt. The majority advocated more direct, radical approaches to influencing others. “Boldness and abrasive scolding were considered essential to many wandering philosophers if their teaching was to have impact” writes Tidball.⁶³ But Paul shied away from such heavy-handedness. Gentleness and patience were prized fruits of the Spirit⁶⁴ and characteristics of the Lord’s own ministry.⁶⁵ Thus he preferred to deal with people with the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” rather than with the high-handed imperiousness of self-seekers. He believed, as Stott says, that “the chief characteristic of Christian leaders is humility not authority, and gentleness, not power.”⁶⁶ “The same tendency to be over-zealous in correcting faults of others,” writes Tidball, “was, and still is, to be found in the church, and those same abrasive qualities are often prized among preachers. But Paul shows that ... gentleness was not only effective, but right.”⁶⁷

⁵⁶ Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, p. 175

⁵⁷ 1 Thess. 2:17

⁵⁸ 1 Thess. 2:17,18

⁵⁹ 1 Thess. 2:7-9

⁶⁰ 2 Cor. 12:14

⁶¹ 1 Thess. 5:14

⁶² Col. 1:28; 1 Thess. 2:12; Acts 20:28

⁶³ Tidball, p. 106

⁶⁴ Gal. 5:23

⁶⁵ Matt. 11:28

⁶⁶ Stott, p. 120

⁶⁷ Tidball, p. 106

II. Transparent

A second feature of Paul's pastoral relationships was his transparency. There was no hint of deceit or duplicity in what he said or did, no selfish motivation aimed at duping unsuspecting followers. All was open and above board.

At the root of this was the deep sense of commission and accountability that underlay his ministry. Paul was aware that he had been divinely called and entrusted with the stewardship of the gospel of God. This was not something he had contrived to gain, but had been laid hold of for. He writes to the Thessalonians about being "approved by God [declared fit after a process of testing] to be entrusted with the gospel."⁶⁸ With that privilege, however, came a deep sense of accountability. He knew that his mission was not one of self-pleasing, and still less, of man-pleasing, but of pleasing God who "tests our hearts."⁶⁹ It was this that led him to reject all false or sinful motives and gave a raw honesty to his ministry.

In practice, that resulted in an open and transparent presentation of gospel truth. Writing to the Corinthians he can say "... we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."⁷⁰ "In seeking intelligent decisions from his hearers," writes Thomas, "he presented facts in their true light."⁷¹ Nothing else was consistent with a gospel that was in itself both the truth, and the power of God to salvation. Paul knew that any tampering with the truth and shading of the message would rob the gospel of its own inherent power.⁷² Consequently, he lived as a man in the light. He was "in the open before God and human beings," writes Stott, "for he had nothing whatever to hide. Happy are those Christian leaders today who hate hypocrisy and love integrity, who have nothing to conceal or be ashamed of, who are well known for who and what they are, and who are able to appeal without fear to God and the public as witnesses! We need more transparency and openness of this kind today."⁷³

III. Authoritative

We turn thirdly and finally to the matter of Paul's authority in his ministry. According to Tidball, this aspect of his ministry has been something of a "storm centre" in recent NT studies, some claiming that Paul was strongly authoritarian in his pastoral approach, and others stoutly denying it.⁷⁴ The fact that this issue has spilt over into local church dynamics, and in many instances has been the occasion of division and dissent, makes it worthwhile exploring in some depth.

That Paul was conscious of acting with the authority of Christ is evident everywhere in his letters. Repeatedly, "requests are made 'through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 1:10); discipline is exercised 'in the Lord Jesus Christ' (2 Thess. 3:12); household instructions are given 'in the name of the Lord' (1 Thess. 4:2; 2 Thess. 3:6) and teaching is rendered 'by the word of the Lord' (1 Thess. 4:15)."⁷⁵ Paul was no 'lone operator', but a commissioned servant of the Lord Jesus himself. Three things are of particular importance in regard to the authority he claimed:

- i) That it *derived from his conversion, call and commission to be an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ*. His encounter with the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus was the turning point of his life. Not only did he discover there the truth concerning the Lord, but received a charge to take that truth to the Gentiles. It was this that entitled him to speak in the name of the Lord

⁶⁸ 1 Thess. 2:4

⁶⁹ 1 Thess. 2:4

⁷⁰ 2 Cor. 4:2f.

⁷¹ Thomas, "1 and 2 Thessalonians", *Expositors Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11, p. 257

⁷² 1 Cor. 1:17

⁷³ Stott, p. 47

⁷⁴ Tidball, p. 114

⁷⁵ Belleville, "Authority", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, p. 55

Jesus. He was aware of receiving his commission from the Lord, not men.⁷⁶ In this respect his authority is distinct from all other expressions of pastoral authority. His was received directly from the Lord; ours is derived indirectly from the writings of Paul and the other apostles.⁷⁷

ii) That it was inseparably *connected with the gospel*. Paul's authority was not a personal gift in the sense that he was entitled to speak authoritatively on his own accord. As Stott puts it, "his authority is not a personal possession, neither is his power a personal quality. Authority and power exist only in so far as Paul is an agent of the gospel."⁷⁸ In essence it simply meant that he was an accredited messenger of the truth entrusted to him by the Lord Jesus. In other words, his authority was tied up with the gospel. This not only explains the ultimate purpose of that authority, but also its limits. The apostles were themselves subject to the gospel. Paul makes it clear in his letter to the Galatians that no apostle – neither he nor any other – could ride roughshod over the gospel.⁷⁹ As he writes later in this same letter, he had no hesitation opposing Peter when the latter acted in a way that contradicted the heart of the gospel message.⁸⁰ "Paul saw his apostleship [and that of others] as wholly subordinate to, or better, as wholly in the service of the gospel.... An apostle could not ride roughshod over the gospel. Apostolic authority was conditioned upon the gospel and subject to the norm of the gospel."⁸¹

iii) That it was *exercised in the faithful transmission of the gospel*. Paul did not for moment consider himself as a source of new truth, but as a faithful transmitter of received truth, the apostolic tradition.⁸² Apostolic authority was not innovative authority. "It resided in a common core of traditions about the life and teaching of Jesus, carefully preserved and transmitted by the early church. The apostolic task was that of faithful transmission of these traditions to new congregations rather than origination (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15)."⁸³ This point is highlighted especially at the beginning of the fourth chapter of 1 Thessalonians. There, in technical language taken from communiqués from military commanders to their field subordinates, Paul refers to giving his readers instructions "by the authority of the Lord Jesus."⁸⁴ Commenting on this, Belleville mentions that the technical language of this passage shows that "Paul was not an innovator but merely a transmitter of what was commonly considered to be appropriate and necessary instruction for Gentile converts."⁸⁵

This understanding of the source and nature of apostolic authority affected the way Paul exercised it. Again, there are three points of significance for us to note.

i) Firstly, the fact that Paul didn't regard his commission as investing him with any innate superiority over other believers led him to exercise his authority *among believers for their good, rather than over them, at his whim*.⁸⁶ He makes this point specifically in writing his second letter to the Corinthians. Explaining why he changed his travel plans – in order to avoid having to make another painful visit to them – he hastens to add, "not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith that you stand firm."⁸⁷ Elsewhere in this same letter he insists that the Lord has given him authority for building up rather than for pulling down.⁸⁸ There was no sense in which Paul lorded it over his converts. His gospel authority made him a determined communicator of the truth, but didn't turn him into a tyrant. As Robert Banks puts it, "The apostle – for all his divine call, diverse gifts, and founding labours – does not set himself in a hierarchical position above his communities or act

⁷⁶ Gal. 1:1

⁷⁷ Stott p. 196

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 115

⁷⁹ Gal. 1:8

⁸⁰ Gal. 2:11ff.

⁸¹ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 572

⁸² Belleville, p. 55

⁸³ Belleville, p. 57

⁸⁴ 1 Thess. 4:2

⁸⁵ Belleville, p. 55

⁸⁶ Dunn, p. 574

⁸⁷ 2 Cor. 1:24

⁸⁸ 2 Cor. 10:8

in an authoritarian manner toward them. He refuses to do this since Christ, not he, is their Master (2 Cor. 4:5). As himself subject to Christ, Paul stands *with* them in all that he does ... He does not issue his approvals, encouragements, instructions, warnings, and censures *in isolation from* the community but as one *who stands within it*, surrounded by all the gifts and ministries the Spirit has granted its members.”⁸⁹

ii) It meant that he was *more concerned to persuade than to impose*. The fact that Paul recognized that it was ultimately the gospel itself that possessed authority meant that he concentrated on winning the consent of people rather than on demanding their obedience. While he didn’t hesitate to use his authority where he needed to, he also exercised a significant degree of restraint in appealing to it.⁹⁰ He expected churches to obey him, but he preferred to appeal to them rather than issuing demands. As Banks has written, “Both outside the churches and within them Paul seeks the voluntary decision of his hearers. He highly prizes their full consent and commitment to what he has to say. Often he attempts to win this in the most passionate way; ‘urging’ rather than simply ‘asking’ them or speaking to them. ... Paul exercises authority among his communities by persuading them to accept his point of view. He does not try to coerce his converts. His persuasion is based on his capacity to convince them, by word and example, that he desires for them only what the gospel requires.”⁹¹ In Paul’s mind, nothing had been gained unless people came to see the truth for themselves. “A nominal obedience does not result in any real growth in understanding or living.”⁹²

iii) At the same time, Paul was always ready to appeal to his authority and *use it more drastically when occasion demanded*. As Belleville puts it, “When churches had moved beyond the request stage, Paul did not hesitate to use his authority.”⁹³ As far as he was concerned, the gospel was the word of the Lord Jesus Christ. His instructions were the instructions of the Lord Jesus Christ, and for that reason, they had to be obeyed. When he encounters persistent rebellion among the idle in the Thessalonian congregation, he writes to the faithful section of the congregation in no uncertain terms saying, “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you brothers to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.”⁹⁴ Here his words have a definite military ring about them. Then a little later he writes again, “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him in order that he may feel ashamed.”⁹⁵ In extreme cases, he was ready to impose the discipline of temporary isolation upon offenders, and in worse cases still, permanent exclusion. These are strong measures to be obeyed and not debated. But it should be clear that in making these demands, the apostle is not imposing his own will or seeking his own interests, but using his personal influence to ensure that the will of the Lord is done. When serious departures of doctrine or practice emerge, Paul is ready to use the strongest of language to bring people to their senses. And he does this for Christ’s sake, as his representative, and not out of any inherent authority.

Conclusion

This brief study has, I trust, helped show how formative the gospel itself was in the pastoral ministry of the apostle Paul. It supplied the content of his instruction, dictated the methods he used, and influenced the manner in which he went about his ministry. To isolate pastoral practice from the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ inevitably robs it of its power and sets it afloat from its controls. On the other hand, pastoral practice emerging from a deep appreciation of the gospel will always be appropriate and effective.

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⁸⁹ Banks, p. 178 [Emphasis added]

⁹⁰ Dunn, p. 57

⁹¹ Banks, pp. 176, 180

⁹² Ibid, p. 180

⁹³ Belleville, p. 57

⁹⁴ 2 Thess. 3:6

⁹⁵ 2 Thess. 3:14

