

The Duty of a Pastor

By John Owen

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Additional notes in blue; original notes by Wm Goold in black “- ED.”

“And I will give you pastors according to my heart,
which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.” Jer. 3:15

All the names of the officers of the church under the New Testament have a double significance. There is a *general* and larger significance, and a *special* significance. For instance, **διάκονος** a “deacon” has a general significance: it signifies *any* minister or servant; and it has a special significance when it denotes that *special officer* which was instituted in the church to take care of the poor. And so the name of *a pastor* has a more general and a more special significance. In general, it signifies any teacher or officer in the church, ordinary or extraordinary; in special, it signifies that special officer in the church which, as such, is distinguished from a teacher, “He gave some to be pastors and teachers,” Eph. 4:11. For there is a distinction between pastor and teacher, *not as to order, but as to degree*. I do not use the distinction in the same sense of those who make bishops and presbyters differ in degree, but not in order; but it is distinct as to that beautiful order which Christ has instituted in His church. Christ has instituted a beautiful order in His church, if it were discovered and improved. And I have wished sometimes I could live to see it; but I do not think I will. Yet this I would recommend to my brethren as the way to discover the order of Christ in the church: there is no way to discover it except by the harmony that exists between gifts, office, and edification. The origin of all church order and rule is in *gifts*; the exercise of those gifts is by *office*; and the end of all those gifts and offices is *edification*.

Now I believe I can demonstrate that all ordinary spiritual gifts that Christ has given to his church, are reducible to four groups: and all of them are for the exercise of these gifts; for they must all be exercised distinctly. In this you will find the beautiful order of Christ in the church, and not elsewhere. I say, all gifts may be reduced to four groups. The one group of these gifts is to be exercised by the *pastor*; one by the *teacher*; one by the *ruler*; and one by the *deacon*: and all these gifts, exercised by all these officers, answer all the ends of the edification of the church. It is a vain opinion that the rule and conduct of Christ’s church is either in one or in all. There is nothing in what I have declared except the intent of the apostle in Rom. 12:6-8.² Let us study that harmony more, and we will find more of the beauty and glory of it.

I will speak of those pastors mentioned here in the text; and I will speak of them in general, as referring to all teaching in the church, which is the general significance of the word. And all that I will speak of them is to remind myself, my brethren, and you, somewhat of the duty of such a pastor: what is incumbent on him and what is expected from him. Now, I do not intend to go through all the necessary duties of a pastor or teacher; I only intend to give some instances.

¹ Text taken from *John Owen, Works*, vol. 9, Part 3 (Johnston & Hunter, 1850-1853, ed. Wm. Goold), pp. 563-574.

² **Rom 12:6-8** Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them*: if prophecy, *let us prophesy* in proportion to our faith; 7 or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; 8 he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

*First, the duty of an officer of the church*³ – that is, of a pastor, teacher, or elder of the church – is that duty mentioned in the text: “to feed the church with knowledge and understanding.”^{Jer 3.15} This feeding is by preaching of the gospel. One who does not feed his flock is no pastor. It is an essential part of the office; and that is not now and then as occasion serves (according to the figure and image that is set up of the ministry in the world, which is *a dead idol*). But the apostle says in Acts 6:4, “We will give ourselves continually to the word.” It is to “labor in the word and doctrine,” 1 Tim. 5:17; it is to make all things subservient to this work of preaching and instructing the church; it is to do it in that frame of mind which the apostle mentions in Col. 1:28. He speaks of his preaching, and the design of his preaching: “Whom we preach, *warning* every man, and *teaching* every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” How does he do it? Verse 29, “For which I labor, striving according to his working, which works in me mightily.” There is not one word in our translation that conveys the emphasis of the original words, “For which I labor,” – Εἰς ὃ καὶ κοπιῶ. Κοπιῶ is to labor with diligence and intention, with weariness and industry. “I labor until I have spent myself. Striving (ἀγωνιζόμενος) – striving like a man that runs in a race, or striving as a man that wrestles for victory,” – as men did in their public contests. And how is this done? Κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ – “According to the effectual in-working (or inward operation) of the one (ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ) who effectually works in me.” We cannot attain the emphasis by any words in our language. And how is all this? Ἐν δυνάμει – “With mighty power.” Here is the frame of the apostle’s spirit (it should give us dread in considering it): “I labor diligently, I strive as in a race, I wrestle for victory, by the mighty in-working power of Christ working in me; and that is with great and exceeding power.”

What I will do is to show you, in some instances, what is required for this work of teaching or of feeding the congregation with knowledge and understanding, in this duty of preaching the word:

1. *Spiritual wisdom* is required in understanding the mysteries of the gospel, so that we may be able to declare the whole counsel of God, and the riches and treasures of the grace of Christ to the souls of men.⁴ Many in the church of God were, in those days of light, growing and thriving; they had a great insight into spiritual things, and into the mysteries of the gospel. The apostle prays that they might all have it: Eph. 1:17-18,

“That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of his calling, and what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.”

³ It is proper to inform the reader that several things in this sermon are to be found in Dr. Owen’s “True Nature of a Gospel Church,” chap. 5.

⁴ **Acts 20:27** "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God; **1Cor 2:1** And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³ I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. ⁴ And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; **Eph 3:7-9** of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. ⁸ To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ.

Really, it is no easy thing for ministers to instruct to such kinds of duties. If there is not some degree of eminency in themselves, how will we lead such persons as these to perfection? We must labor *ourselves* to have a thorough knowledge of these mysteries, or we will be useless to a great part of the church. Spiritual wisdom and understanding in the mysteries of the gospel are required for it.

2. *Authority* is required. What authority is there in a preaching ministry? It is a consequence of unction, and not of office. The scribes had an outward call to teach in the church; but they had no unction, no anointing, that could evidence they had the Holy Ghost in his gifts and graces. Christ had no outward call; But he had an unction – he had a full unction of the Holy Ghost in his gifts and graces for the preaching of the gospel. On this there was controversy about his authority. The scribes said to him in Mark 11:28, “By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this authority?” The Holy Ghost determines the matter, Matt. 7:29, “He preached as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” They had the authority of office, but not of unction; Christ had only that unction. And preaching in the Spirit, which men quarrel so much about, is nothing less than the evidence in their preaching of unction, in the communication of gifts and grace for preaching and for the discharge of their office. For it is a vain thing for men to assume and impersonate authority. They have only as much authority in preaching as they have evidence of unction from God in gifts and grace, and no more. Let everyone, then, keep within his bounds.

3. Another thing required for this is, *experience* of the power of the things we preach to others. I think, truly, *that no man preaches a sermon well to others who does not first preach it to his own heart*. If someone does not feed on, digest, and thrive by what he prepares for his people, he may give them poison as far as he knows; for unless he finds the power of it in his own heart, he cannot have any ground of confidence that it will have power in the hearts of others. *It is an easier thing to bring our heads to preach than our hearts to preach*. To bring our heads to preach, is nothing more than to fill our minds and memories with some notions of truth, of our own or other men, and speak them out to give satisfaction to ourselves and others: this is very easy. But to bring our *hearts* to preach, is to be transformed into the power of these truths; or to find the power of them, both before (in preparing our minds and hearts), and in delivering them so that we may benefit; and to be presented with zeal for God and compassion to the souls of men. A man may preach every day in the week, and not have his heart engaged once. This has lost us powerful preaching in the world and set up quaint orations instead; for such men never seek the experience of it in their own hearts. And so it has come to pass that some men’s preaching, and some men’s not preaching, have lost us the power of what we call the ministry. Though there be twenty or thirty thousand preachers, the nation perishes for lack of knowledge, and it is overwhelmed by all kinds of sins, and it is not delivered from them to this day.

4. *Skill* to divide the word rightly. This skill to divide the word rightly, is *practical wisdom* in considering the word of God, to take out not only what is substantial food for the souls of men, but what is fit food for those to whom we preach. And that,

5. *The knowledge and consideration* of the state of our flocks. He who does not have the state of his flock continually in his eye and in his mind in his work of preaching, fights uncertainly, like a man beating the air. If he does not consider what the state of his flock is with reference to temptations, in reference to their light or to their darkness, to their growth or their decays, to their flourishing or their withering, to the measure of their knowledge and attainments – he who does not duly consider these things, never preaches to them correctly.

6. There is required, too, that we be motivated by *zeal* for the glory of God, and *compassion* for the souls of men.

Having spoken these few plain words, I may say, “Who is sufficient for these things?” There is that spiritual wisdom which is necessary to understand the mysteries of the gospel, and is able to instruct and lead on to perfection the most grown in our congregations – that authority which proceeds from unction, and is an evidence of an anointing with the graces and gifts of the Spirit; this alone gives authority in preaching – that experience which conforms our whole soul into every sermon that we preach, so as to feel the truth in the power of it – that skill by which to divide the word correctly, etc. Hence we see that we have great need to pray for ourselves, and that you should pray for us. Pray for your ministers. This, then, is the first duty required of gospel ministers: to feed the church with knowledge and understanding.

Secondly. Another duty required is, *continual prayer* for the churches over which Christ has made them overseers. I do not have time to confirm these things by particular testimonies. But you know how often the apostle expresses it about himself and enjoins others to continually pray for the flock.

I will name four reasons why we ought to do so, and four things we ought to pray for –

1. My first reason is because I believe that no man can have *any evidence* in his own soul that he conscientiously performs any ministerial duty towards his flock, if he does not *continually pray for them*. Let him preach as much as he will, unless God keeps in him a *spirit of prayer* privately and in his family for them, he can have no evidence that he performs any other ministerial duty in a manner that is acceptable to God. I speak to those who are wise, and understand these things.

2. This is the way by which we may *bless* our congregations.

Authoritative blessing, as far as I know, has been taken from us. Only that which is prayerful⁵ and declarative is left to us; *pronouncing* the blessing is only prayerful and declarative, and not authoritative. Now there is no way by which we can bless our flocks by institution, but only by *continually praying* for a blessing upon them.

3. If men continue to be as they have always been, then I do not believe any minister, any pastor in the world, can keep up a love for his church, if he does not pray for them. He will meet with so many provocations, imprudences, and miscarriages, that nothing can keep his heart inflamed with love for them, except by praying for them continually. That will conquer all prejudices if he continues to do so. And –

4. My last reason is this, in our prayers for people, *God will teach us what we should preach* to them. We cannot pray for them, unless we think about what it is we should pray for, and that is the consideration of their condition; and in this, God teaches the ministers of the gospel. If it is so with the people, then this is what their ministers should teach them. The more we pray for our people, the better we will be instructed as to what to teach them. The apostles, above all other occasions, “gave themselves to prayer and the word,” Act 4:4. Prayer is in the first place. It is not personal prayer, but *ministerial* prayer, for the church and for the progress of the gospel.

What will we pray for?

⁵ Originally “eutical” (*eucomai*, to desire earnestly, or to pray), expressive of desire. – ED.

1. For *the success of the word* that we preach to them. This falls in with the light of nature. We are to pray for the success of the word to all its ends; that is, for all the ends of living to God – for direction in duty, for instruction in the truth, for growth in grace, for all things by which we may come to enjoy God. We should pray that all these ends may be accomplished in our congregations in the dispensation of the word, or else we sow seed randomly; we will not succeed merely by sowing; for even if the farmer breaks up the fallow ground, and harrows it, and casts in the seed – unless showers come, he will have no crop; in the same way, after we have cast the seed of the gospel, even though the hearts of men are prepared in some measure, unless the showers of the Spirit come upon them, there will be no profiting. Therefore, let us pray that a blessing might be upon the word. If the ministers of the word preach it, and would have it accepted by the people, then take this “arcanum” [the secret] of it – *pray over it*. This is the only way to have it accepted in the hearts of the people: follow it with prayer.

2. We are to pray *for the presence of Christ* in all our assemblies; for this is what all the efficacy of the ordinances of the gospel depends upon. Christ has given us many promises of his presence; and we are to act in faith concerning it, and pray in faith for it in our assemblies. This is a great ministerial duty. If we do not pray for it, we are ignorant of our duty, and are willing to labor in the fire where all must perish. We fight at risk: for all the efficacy of the ordinances of preaching, and praying, does not depend on anything in ourselves – on our gifts, notions, parts, or fervency – but only on the presence of Christ. Make this your business: to pray mightily for the presence of Christ in the congregation, to make all these effectual.

3. Our prayers should be with respect to *the state and condition* of the church. It is supposed that the minister is satisfied he has some measure of understanding and knowledge in the mysteries of the gospel; that he is able to conduct the best of the congregation to salvation; that he knows their measure, their weakness, and their temptations; that he knows the times and seasons in which they are exercised and exposed, whether they are times of adversity or prosperity; and, as far as possible, he knows how it is with their persons.⁶ And we ought to suit our prayers according to all we know concerning them, and be satisfied in it, that Christ himself will come in to recover those who are fallen, to establish those who are tempted, to encourage those who are running and pressing forward to perfection, to relieve those who are disconsolate in the dark: and we have all these sorts in our churches.

Thirdly. It is incumbent on men who are pastors and teachers of churches, *to preserve the truth* and doctrine of the gospel that is committed to the church – to keep it entire, and to defend it against all opposition. See the weighty words with which the apostle gives this in charge to Timothy, 1 Tim. 6:20, “O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust;” and 2 Tim. 1:14, “That good thing” (τὴν καλὴν παρακαταθήκην – that good *deposit*, that good *treasure*) “that is committed to you by the Holy Ghost which dwells in us.” This charge is given to all of us who are ministers, “*Keep the truth*, that good, that blessed thing.” “It is,” says the apostle, “the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust,” 1 Tim. 1:11. And it is committed to *all* our trust; and we are to keep it against all opposition. The church is the ground and pillar of truth, to hold up and declare the truth in and by its ministers. But is that all? No; the church “is like the tower of David built for an armory, on which there hang a thousand bucklers and shields of mighty men,” Cant. 4:4. The ministers of the gospel are shields and bucklers to defend the truth against all adversaries and opposers. The church has had thousands of bucklers

⁶ That is, as to their needs, infirmities, knowledge, and capacities, etc.

and shields of mighty men, or else the truth would have been lost. They are not only to *declare* it in the preaching of the gospel; but to *defend* and preserve it against all opposition – to hold up the shield and buckler of faith against all opposers.

But what is *required for this*?

1. There is required a *clear apprehension* in ourselves of those doctrines and truths which we are to defend. Truth may be lost by weakness as well as wickedness. If we do not have a full apprehension of the truth, and if it does not rest upon its own proper grounds and principles, we will never be able to defend it. This is to be attained by all ways and means – by the use, especially, of diligent prayer and study – so that we may be able to stop the mouth of gainsayers.⁷

2. There is required a *love of the truth*. We will never contend earnestly for the truth, we will never “buy it and not sell it,” [Prov 23.23](#) whatever we know of it, unless our love and value of it arise from a sense and experience of it in our own souls. I fear there is much loss of truth, not for lack of light, knowledge, and ability, but *for lack of love*.

I have the advantage of most who are present here, in this: that I know the contest we had for the truths of the gospel before our troubles began;⁸ and I was a person that was early engaged in them; and I knew those godly ministers that contended for them as for their lives and souls; and I know that all opposition that was made against them was never able to discourage them. What were these doctrines? The doctrines of eternal predestination, effectual conversion to God, and the obduration⁹ of the wicked reprobates¹⁰ by the providence of God. These truths are not lost for lack of skill, but for lack of love. We scarcely hear one word about them; we are almost ashamed to mention them in the church – and he that does mention them will surely expose himself to public obloquy¹¹ and scorn – but we must not be ashamed of truth. Formerly we could not meet with a godly minister without the error of Arminianism being looked upon by him as the ruin and poison of the souls of men. Such ministers trembled at it – they wrote and disputed against it. But now it is not so; the doctrine of the gospel is still owned, though it is little taken notice of by some among ourselves, the love of it being greatly decayed – the sense and power of it is almost lost. But we have gained no ground by ignoring it; we are not more holy, or more fruitful, than we were in preaching those doctrines, and attending diligently to them.

3. Let us take heed in ourselves of any inclinations to *novel opinions*, especially in, about, or against such points of faith as those in which those who have gone before us, and fallen asleep, found life, comfort, and power. Who would have thought that we would become indifferent to the doctrine of justification, and quarrel and dispute about the interest of works in justification; about general redemption, which removes the efficacy of the redeeming work of Christ; and about the perseverance of the saints; when these were the soul and life of those who have gone

⁷ *Gainsayers*: those who question the truth or validity of sound doctrine, or take exception to it .

⁸ In 1680, just 18 years after the Act of Uniformity drove the Puritans from their pulpits, Edward Stillingfleet, Dean of St. Paul’s, preached his sermon on “The Mischief of Separation.” Owen defended the Nonconformists from the charge of schism in his treatise, *Brief Vindication*. Owen may be referring here to that controversy.

⁹ *Obduration*: hardened in wrongdoing or wickedness; stubbornly impenitent.

¹⁰ *Reprobates*: those who are abandoned to eternal damnation.

¹¹ *Obloquy*: a state of disgrace resulting from public abuse, or more likely, resulting from a false accusation of an offense or from a malicious misrepresentation of someone’s words or actions.

before us, those who found the power and comfort of them? We will not maintain these truths, unless we find the same comfort in them as they did. I have lived to see great alterations in the godly ministers of the nation, both as to their zeal for and their value of those important truths that were the life of the Reformation – the doctrine of free-will, condemned in a prayer,¹² is bound up in the end of your Bibles. But now it has become an indifferent thing; and the horrible corruptions we allow to be introduced in the doctrine of justification have weakened all the vitals of religion. Let us, for the remainder of our days, “buy the truth, and sell it not;” and let us be zealous and watchful over anything that should arise in our congregations.

Bring one man into the congregation who has an opinion, and he will make more stir about it than all the rest of the congregation in building up one another in their most holy faith. Take heed lest there be men arising from ourselves who are speaking perverse things; this makes way for grievous wolves to break in, and tear and rend the flock.

4. There is *skill and ability* required to discover and be able to oppose and confound the cunning sophistry of the adversaries. Great prayer, watchfulness, and diligence are required, so that we may be able to attend to these things. And those who are less skilled would do well to counsel with those who are more experienced in them, to obtain help and assistance from them.

Lastly. I will mention one more duty that is required of pastors and teachers in the church; and that is – that *we labor diligently for the conversion of souls*. This work is committed to them. I would not mention this except to rectify a mistake in some. The end of all particular churches is the calling and edification of the catholic church. Christ has not appointed his ministers to look to themselves only; they are to be the means of calling and gathering the elect in all ages: and this they are principally to do by their ministry. I confess there are other outward ways and means by which men have been, and may be, converted. I find, by long observation, that common light, in conjunction with afflictions, begin the conversion of many without this or that special word – and persons may be converted to God by religious conference. There may be many *occasional* conversions wrought by the instrumentality of men who have real spiritual gifts for the dispensation of the word, and who are occasionally called to that. But principally this work is committed to the pastors of churches, for the conversion of souls.

Take this observation: *the first object of the word is the world.*¹³ *Our work* is the same as the apostles’ work; the *method* is directly contrary. The apostles had a work committed to them, and this was their method: *the primary work* committed to the apostles was convincing and converting sinners to Christ among Jews and Gentiles – to preach the gospel to convert infidels – they considered this their *chief* work. Paul made nothing of administering the ordinance of baptism in comparison to preaching the gospel. “Christ did not send me,” he says “to baptize, but to preach the gospel,” 1 Cor. 1:17. In comparison, I say, preaching was their *chief* work. And then, *their second work* was to teach those who were disciples, to do and observe whatever Christ commanded them, and to bring them into church order. *This was their method.*

Now the same *work* is committed to the pastors of churches; but in a contrary *method*. The primary object of our ministry as pastors is the *church* – to build up and edify the church. But what then? Is the other part of the work taken away, that they should not preach to convert souls?

¹² Augustine prayed, “O God, command what you would, and grant what you command.” It outraged Pelagius who constructed his heresy, echoed in the *Apology of the Arminians*. Owen rebutted it in 1642 in his *Display of Arminianism*.

¹³ That is, the audience for the gospel is the world.

God forbid. There are several ways by which those who are pastors of churches preach to the conversion of souls:

1. When other persons who are unconverted come to where they are preaching, to their own congregations (which we experience every day), they are to be converted to God by the pastoral discharge of their duty. “No,” say some; “they preach to the church as *ministers* – to others only as *spiritually gifted*.” But no man can make this distinction in his own conscience. Suppose there are five hundred *in this place*, and a hundred *of this church*, can you make a distinction between them? Am I preaching in a *double* capacity – to some as a minister, and to others *not* as a minister? Neither rule, nor reason, nor natural light, expresses anything to that purpose. We preach *as ministers* to whom we preach, for the conversion of their souls.

2. Ministers may preach for the conversion of souls, when they preach elsewhere occasionally. They preach as ministers wherever they preach. I know *the Indelible Character*¹⁴ is a figment, but the pastors’ office is not something men may leave at home when they go abroad. It is not in a minister’s own power, unless lawfully dismissed or deposed, to keep himself from preaching as a minister. And it is the duty of particular churches (one end of their institution being the calling and gathering of the catholic church) to part with their officers for a season, when called to preach in other places for converting souls to Christ. We had a glorious ministry in the last age – wonderful instruments for the conversion of souls. Did they convert them as *gifted men*, and not *as ministers*? God forbid. I say, it may be done by those who have received gifts, and have not been called to office; but I know of no ground that any man has to give himself up to the constant exercise of ministerial gifts, and not say to the Lord in prayer, “Lord, here am I; send me.”

If I had time and strength, I would tell you of the duty of pastors and teachers in administering the seals, and what is required for it; and their duty in directing and comforting the consciences of all sorts of believers – what prudence, purity, condescension, and patience are required in it, as a great part of our ministerial duty.

I would show you, also, their duty in the rule of the church. It is not that Christ ever intended to commit the rule of the church to them alone – to take them off that great and important duty of preaching the gospel; but as time and occasions allow them, they are to attend to the rule of the church.

And lastly, their duty in exemplary conversation, and in assembling with other churches of their order, for managing church communion.

“Who is sufficient for these things?” Pray, *pray* for us; and God strengthen us, and our brother, who has been called this day to the work! It may not be unuseful to him and me, to be mindful of these things, and to beg the assistance of our brethren.

¹⁴ The “indelible character” is the dogma of the church of Rome – that a man ordained to be priest within its pale can lose his priestly character; and though he even cease to be a Christian, cannot cease to be a Christian bishop, priest, or deacon, if he has previously held any of these offices in the church. The dogma can be traced no farther back than the days of the schoolmen. The Council of Nice decreed that certain bishops and presbyters, who had been ordained by Miletius, a deposed bishop, should be re-ordained before they could exercise their office. Dr. Campbell, in his “Lectures on Ecclesiastical History,” reviews at some length he discussions on the “indelible character.” Speaking of those who are argued for the unreiterable sacraments, to which ordination, according to the church of Rome, belongs, he remarks (lecture 11), “The whole of what they agreed in amounts to this – something, they know not what, is imprinted, they know not how, on something in the soul of the recipient, they know not where – which can never be deleted.” – ED.