

**+ Acts 20:28-35 + The Shepherd Cares for His Sheep +  
+ 3rd Sunday after Epiphany: St. Titus, Pastor and Confessor + 26 January 2014 +**

When does a pastor realize that he's a pastor? Yes, the pastoral ministry is a job, but it's more than a profession. In our church body, a young man spends eight years after high school being trained to shepherd a congregation like our own. During that training, he studies subjects like literature and history and music and science, yet he also spends most of his time studying the Word of God—learning Bible history, getting to know the individual teachings of God's Word, how they fit together, and how they practically apply to real life. He spends years studying the Biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew so he can study God's Word in the original languages and use it to preach and teach.

Yet all that training and field experience doesn't necessarily make him a pastor. He's trained for that purpose, but Christ through his Church calls young men to serve as pastors in congregations and mission fields. The young man doesn't receive a dream in the night or some heartburn in the morning telling him he's going to be a pastor in this place at this time. He doesn't feel a call coming on. Neither does he put out applications to serve where he wants. No, Christ calls his shepherds through his Church, through a congregation, a flock in need of a shepherd.

So a young man about to graduate from our Seminary sits in eager anticipation on Call Day, when the assignments are handed out, and waits to hear where the Lord is going to place him. He hears his name and the name of a congregation announced, but is he a pastor yet? Well, I guess you could say he's a "pastor-elect". He starts making contacts with his new congregation and details get worked out for the move and his installation.

Finally the day arrives when he stands before the congregation vowing to uphold the true teaching of God's Word and conform all his practice to that Word as the shepherd of this flock. He hears a sobering list of responsibilities, ones that can have an eternal impact on souls, and his excitement turns fearful. "I'm a pastor? I have **"to guide the sheep and the lambs of God's flock"**? I have **"to protect the flock from savage wolves"**? Holy cow!" (*Christian Worship: Occasional Services* pg. 247)

Mom and Dad leave the next day and the young man wonders, "Now what?" "Pastor" now becomes his first name. As pastor, he now has to draw up worship plans, write sermons, teach Bible studies and confirmation classes, visit the sick and dying, counsel the hurting, equip God's people, plan outreach, and lead the flock entrusted to him. He makes mistakes along the way. Sometimes they're big mistakes, but over time through challenges and blessings, mistakes and victories, the young man realizes he is a pastor, the shepherd of this flock that God in his grace entrusted to him. His congregation gets to know him not only as a pastor who happens to be serving them, but to trust him as their pastor whom God gave them.

This bond between shepherd and flock is forged, you could say, "in the trenches". A series of hospital visits leads to the pastor's first funeral as he ministers to the dying soul and the grieving family. A series of counseling sessions with a couple whose marriage is struggling or wrestling alongside the leaders with a deep-seated issue within the congregation leads to new bonds between shepherd and sheep. Time spent in the classroom, in homes, in the community with adults or children or little ones helps the shepherd know his flock and they him. Major outreach efforts forge stronger bonds as pastor and members work together to carry out Christ's mission in their community, and the pastor realizes he's not just a pastor, but theirs.

Why would a pastor realize he's a pastor at times like that? In those times, the pastor is privileged to personally minister to Christ's lambs and sheep. In those times, the shepherd learns to love and care for the flock entrusted to him, and it's not easy. That flock is full of wayward sheep who love to go their own way, to do their own thing, to have their own opinions about everything and anything, and they're sinful. They stubbornly disobey the will of the Good Shepherd who oversees the pastor and his flock. They run away chasing after whatever is more pressing or more important or more impressive, and they refuse to listen to the Word of God.

What doesn't help is that the pastor, the shepherd is himself a sinful human being. He's always tempted to do his own thing and get his own way. He's always tempted to dig in, when it would be better to lovingly listen. He's always tempted to avoid the voice of the Good Shepherd and needs tough love just as much as his wayward sheep. Yet the Lord of the Church still entrusts his sinful flock to the care of sinful men, because He loves them.

For three years, the Apostle Paul had been serving a growing flock of new believers in a city called Ephesus on the western shore of modern Turkey. Paul taught daily in a lecture hall owned by a man named Tyrannus.

The Lord had blessed his efforts to such an extent that little congregations had formed meeting in homes around the city. During that time, Paul had trained the elders who basically served as the pastors of these little congregations.

From there, Paul had traveled elsewhere to continue spreading the Gospel, but he was now on his way back to Jerusalem. On the way, he stopped in a port called Miletus to meet with these elders and bid them farewell. You see, the Lord had made it clear that Paul would be imprisoned in Jerusalem and Paul wondered if this would be the last time he'd ever see them.

So he met with the elders to say goodbye. He recalled how he had faithfully served the flock and how dearly he loved that God-given flock. After all, many of the people they served had first heard the good news of their Savior from Paul, but it was now time for one last instruction, one last encouragement. He wanted them to remember who they were and whom they served, so he urged them to care for these flocks entrusted to them.

***“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”*** Who was it who had entrusted these flocks to their care? It was the Good Shepherd. It was the Holy Spirit who had given these elders the responsibility they had as ***“overseers”***, as those who were to oversee, to guard, to watch out for God’s flocks. They were to be ***“shepherds”*** or as the word was Latinized—“pastors”.

...But what was the big deal? Why did the Lord show so much care for his flock—for sinners who stray, who are stubborn, who rebel and disobey? ***“The church of God”***, his flock, was purchased at an extraordinarily high price. It was ***“bought with his own blood”***. We were ***“bought with his own blood”***. Think about that for a moment. God loved us so much that he allowed his own blood to be shed to ransom us from the destruction we deserved. Years later, the Apostle Peter would explain this further. ***“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”*** The loving Shepherd sacrificed himself for the sake of his unlovable sheep and by doing so he purchased them for himself.

Now he entrusts these blood-bought flocks to the care of sinful shepherds who need to not only watch the flock, but themselves as well because trouble would come. ***“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!”*** God’s flocks would be attacked by ***“savage wolves”*** who would oppose Christ and the true teaching of his Word. They would also be attacked by some of their own who would stray away from the true teaching of God’s Word and would lead others away.

So how could those shepherds keep watch over themselves and their flocks? How do pastors guard the Lord’s flocks today? Through time spent in the Word of God. Through time spent personally and devotionally studying God’s Word in depth. Through time spent with God’s people studying God’s Word and practically applying it to everyday issues and challenges. If a pastor is not in the Word of God himself, he cannot feed and protect his flock from savage and subtle false teachers. Yet if God’s people are not in the Word, how can they know if their shepherd is leading them down the right path? How can they withstand the attacks of savage wolves or simply those times when pastor and members have to be “in the trenches” together? The shepherd guards his flock when he’s with them regularly in the Word of God. That also means the shepherd does not take advantage of the flock. He should not covet or desire in a sinful way ***“anyone’s silver or gold or clothing”*** or whatever, but instead seeks to help even the weak.

Does the pastor do all that because he’s supposed to do it or because he wants to do it? Well, Paul was what the old Germans used to call a *See/sorger*, literally a “carer of souls”. He didn’t want his students, his hearers, his flock to fall into error or have their faith shipwrecked. He loved them too much to just let that happen. So he pleaded with them and warned them and taught them. You can practically hear Paul’s love as he pleads with them, ***“Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”*** The Good Shepherd wants his pastors to have that same heart for souls, that same love that cares for the eternal future of every soul in his flock, because it was that love that moved the Good Shepherd to lay down his life for all of his sheep.

That’s a pretty huge responsibility for a pastor—to keep watch over himself and his flock, to protect them, to feed and nourish them, to love and care for every one of them, but it’s the love of the Good Shepherd that

enables him to do just that. It's that love of the Good Shepherd that enables a pastor to finally realize he's your pastor as he serves you—Christ's flock.

The Good Shepherd cares for you. He has provided you faithful shepherds in the past, who loved you and cared for you, and this shepherd cares for you more than you know. May our Good Shepherd, who purchased us with his own blood, continue to bless his Church with faithful shepherds and undying love until he gathers all of his flock in the glories of heaven for all eternity. Amen.