

My thanks to your esteemed professor and good friend and brother in Christ, Dr. Van Neste. If you don't already know how privileged you are to sit under such able men and how much you should appreciate them, you will after today. In fact, you will beg for anyone else.

I think you've read something I wrote several years back as I wallowed in my normal Monday melancholy. And frankly, you're right to wonder why I'm standing here and you sitting there. The reality is that I should be sitting there while you lecture me.

While I hope I've made some progress since then, I'm glad this class is on Tuesday rather than Monday!

There are some preliminaries I want to get out of the way before getting to the main course.

### **ASSUMPTIONS**

There are some things I am assuming about your understanding of pastoral ministry; and, therefore won't spend time on them. I will assume you stress these things and are well-versed in their importance.

***The centrality of preaching.*** We are ministers of the Word and therefore are to be the best preachers/teachers we can be.

*For we are not like many, peddling [or piddling!] the word of God but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God (2 Cor 2.17).*

God does not demand any of us become like John Piper or Paul Washer or Mark Driscoll. He demands you be a sincere preacher of Christ whose *"adequacy is from God"* (2 cor 3.5).

***The importance of prayer.*** As we devote ourselves to the ministry of the Word we do also to prayer.

I could include other assumptions such as the ordinances, evangelism, healthy marriage, etc. So, pastoral ministry is nothing if not about Word and prayer. I'll assume you know that and love that.

### **NATURE OF THE CHURCH**

Much of how we understand pastoral ministry emerges from how we understand the nature of the church. Or, our ecclesiology informs how we view the pastoral office.

- Is the church a quasi-business that needs to be managed efficiently and profitably?
- Is the church a corporation that needs a CEO?
- Is the church a team that needs a coach or cheerleader?
- Is the church a brand that needs a clever marketer (maybe someone will ask a question

about this)?

- Is the church a political entity that needs representation or warrior?
- Is the church a recovery institution that needs a counselor?
- Is the church a social service that needs a dynamic, motivational fund-raiser?

You can already tell that, at least, my answer to all those questions is “no.”

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an otherworldly institution. It's the budding new creation community of Christ. It's *the* Christian nation, organized by the Holy Spirit under the lordship of Jesus.

There is no reason why the church should exist some 2,000 years after its founder left. What modern management categories can possibly explain why an institution whose founder, executed as an insurrectionist and vanished into thin air and whose uneducated founders—save one—were all dead fugitives within thirty years of its founding still commits to the founding doctrines?

How can an institution (the Vatican notwithstanding) with no army, no police, no central bank, no congress, no capital, no headquarters, no corporate logo, no infrastructure, no constitution, no borders, no prison, no union possibly survive every attempt to snuff it out?

Why is it that the church unites people (Gal 3.28) who are otherwise separated in the world (ethnicity, class, sex, education)?

The church defies every category we have to define and measure the strength, success and failure of earthly institutions.

Most companies start floundering after a few generations. But not the church. She keeps getting broader and stronger for no other reason than God's sovereign power to fulfill his promise to have a people for himself who forever love and worship Jesus.

Every week millions of folks gather to worship and exalt a person they've never seen, but love (1 Pt 1.8-9). We don't even have a portrait to remind us of who started the whole thing! Who can do such a thing except our God?

We're dealing with completely different categories when it comes to the church. It's a one-of-a-kind institution.

*For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly, that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes true ministry of the Word and sacraments. He so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated he believes his own diminished.*

*It is of no small importance that it is called “the pillar and ground of the truth” and “the house of God (1 Tim. 3:15). By these words Paul means that the church is the faithful keeper of God's truth in order that it may not perish in the world. For by its ministry and labor God willed to have the preaching of the Word kept pure and show himself the Father of a family, while he keeps us with spiritual food and provides everything that makes for our salvation. It is also no common praise to say that Christ has chosen and set apart the church as his bride , “without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing” (Eph 5:27), “his body and . . . fullness” (Eph 1:23). From this it follows that separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ. Hence, we must even more avoid so wicked a separation. For when with all our might we are attempting the overthrow of God's truth, we deserve to have him hurl the whole thunderbolt of his wrath to crush us. Nor can any more atrocious crime be conceived that for us by sacrilegious disloyalty to violate the marriage that the only-begotten Son of God deigned to contract with us” (Calvin, Institutes, IV.1.10).*

You cannot say that about any other earthly institution (not even the SBC!). Nothing carries the weight of the local church of the Lord Jesus Christ. And because it is a one-of-a-kind entity, the pastoral ministry must be a one-of-a-kind type of service. It cannot neither be approached nor measured by earthly categories.

I'm not saying we necessarily and categorically throw out modern concepts/analogies of the church out the window. I am saying you could probably set them by the window and if they happen to fall out then don't rush out to pick them back up.

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is the sojourning, wandering people of God who live between promise and fulfillment. They live in light of the promise that what God has done in and with Jesus he will one day do for us.

We don't want to be comfortable, profitable, likeable, coached to our potential in this foreign land. We want to be shepherded home.

### **STRIVE TO BE ORDINARY**

With all that said, I hope to motivate you to labor, strive, fight, learn, work to be an ordinary pastor. If I were to title what follows it would be “Strive to be Ordinary.”

Eugene Peterson wrote in *Working the Angles*: “. . . the image aspects of being a pastor, the parts that have to do with meeting people's expectations, can be faked easily. We can impersonate a pastor without being a pastor” (p9).

I'll assume most of you will be simple men who faithfully shepherd simple local churches. You don't want to fake your way to the top.

You don't aspire to be mega-church celebrities, radio personalities, missionary gurus or keynote speakers at leadership conferences. You just want to be a pastor who faithfully serves God's people in the local church.

It's not hard to want to the big show. We don't need help getting excited about that or for churches to be excited about their “pastor” in that case. Peterson again writes, “*Being the kind of pastor that satisfies a congregation is one of the easiest jobs on the face of the earth—if we are satisfied with satisfying congregations*” (p10).

But you don't want that. You don't want to collect a paycheck and some blog hits. You want to steward God's grace such that God's people die well in faith. That's the ordinary work of the ministry.

So, striving to be ordinary is far more difficult than striving to be extraordinary. We don't need help wanting to be known, stroked and applauded. We need help wanting to be unknown. What we need is grace and faith and strength to pastor 40 people for 40 years through rough waters, marrying and burying a few generations.

Ironically, the kind of guys we should probably here from at pastors' conferences are the kind of guys who don't aspire to speak at them!

- They find more joy in sitting over coffee with some brothers in his church talking about their marriages than standing before hundreds of guys over home God has given him no formal charge to oversee.
- They care more about being known by his people than by the powers-that-be in Christendom.
- They care more about God knowing his name and ministry than state papers and theological journals.
- They understand that ordinary pastoring leads to an extraordinary church.

But, a small-time church pastor who never gets invited to speak anywhere would say that, right? I'm not bitter.

So, while a church culture would encourage you to be the “next big thing” here are five rungs which can help us climb down the ladder to ordinariness so you won't fake it.

**(1) Get acquainted with suffering.** If there is one thing that Jesus made sure his followers knew about discipleship is that it would be tested with and forged by suffering and

pain.

Jesus told James and John they would have their cups to drink and baptisms to undergo (Mk 10.35-40). Paul considered the authenticating mark of the Christian church to be how joyfully they suffered together (1 Thess 1.6-7; 2.14-15).

*Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which he suffered* (Heb 5.8). If that was true of our Master, then it will be true of his servants. It's easy to obey and believe when it's easy to obey and believe. It's hard to do so when suffering and pain bear down on the Christian soul.

Dear brothers, if you are not well-acquainted with suffering in whatever form God provides then you will not be well-equipped to handle what is most common experience among God's people.

When I say get acquainted with suffering I don't mean manufacturing suffering for yourself (that would be faking it). I mean start training your eyes to recognize and hearts to be drawn to suffering people.

We naturally overlook them in our functional Darwinism in the church. We're drawn to the strong folk. And turn on any church on TV and it looks like all the sexy, healthy gifted people performing their greatest hits with whitened smiles and fancy regalia. If you're not that then you're not all that. Only the strong survive and the weak should find another church.

I love John's story in Jn 5, where Jerusalem is celebrating a feast. It's Mardi Gras in Jerusalem and Jesus passes by all the pretty people and fancy feasts to find the pool of Bethesda, where sick, blind, lame and withered people took their shot at healing.

We want to be like that. We want to resist any notion that Christian discipleship is all smiles and happy-clappy sensationalism. We want to make a beeline for the suffering. We have a great high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb 4.15-16). He "suffers with" us and therefore we do so for the sheep in our charge.

You can do that here on campus. You are men training for pastoral ministry. Therefore, you should be men who resist always huddling up in "temple talk" to find the students who sit alone.

Even more importantly, however, is getting acquainted with suffering through your local church. Get with your pastor or elders and ask if you could tag along to the next hospital visit or funeral home visitation or divorce hearing.

When you go, keep your mouth shut and get to know the pain. Learn to sympathize (to feel

with) the hurting. Immerse yourself in the effects of sin (Jn 11.35). Watch the faces of widows and listen to the hearts of cancer patients. You'll know you're sympathizing when you're led to tears before explanations.

Our job is not to get folks out of suffering with trite platitudes and cute sayings. Our job is to suffer with them.

Brothers, the church and your ministry is not here to help us all live well until we die. It's to help us die well so we can live.

**(2) Develop a theology of encouragement.** Learn how to encourage God's people with the gospel.

I'll be very honest. I've found that for the most part, Christians live discouraged lives. Once you drill down past all the Sunday morning veneer, you will find most people struggle.

There's no one reason why this is the case. The world, flesh and devil all conspire to hijack Christian joy and constrain us.

I do wonder what role a generation or two of moralistic preaching has played. If our main diet of Scripture is how much more we should be doing, how much less we should be sinning, how much more we should be giving and how much differently we should be living, how rightly we should be voting, etc. then we shouldn't be surprised that discouragement sets in. And before we're tempted to think God relates to us based on our self-righteousness.

We spend far more time emphasizing what we need to be doing for Jesus than we do on what Jesus has done for us. We doubt that the message of God's grace in the gospel is a sufficient motivator to obedience; therefore, we heap guilt on God's people: the very guilt Jesus died to relieve. And service becomes a burden God has laid on us rather than the light and easy burden Jesus promised those who come to him.

I'm not suggesting we provide false assurance or neglect commands. But the imperatives of obedience in Scripture are always reflexes/instincts of the indicative of the gospel. Some medicine is best taken on a full stomach, or else it causes more pain than the ailment. Likewise, imperatives are digested far easier and with greater hope on souls full of the gospel.

There are many times when God's people simply want to know and be assured that they're doing okay and there is hope for freedom and growth. They want to know God still loves them and Jesus still holds on to them.

*Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be*

*healed* (Heb 12.12-13).

*A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not extinguish* (Is 42.3).

Everything is not always wrong with everyone of God's people. They're being sanctified just like you. They have the internal witness telling them they're a work in progress. They need to be reminded God has begun and will complete his good work in them (Phil 1.6). They don't need ultimatums (do this or else) but hope (do this because God is at work in you!).

*“Weak Christians are like glasses which are hurt with the least violent usage, but if gently handled will continue a long time. This honour of gentle use we are to give to the weaker vessels, by which we shall both preserve them and likewise make them useful to the church and ourselves. In diseased bodies, if all ill humours be purged out, you shall purge life and all away. Therefore, though God says that he will 'refine them as silver is refined', yet he said he had 'refined thee, but not with silver, that is, not so exactly as that no dross remains, for he has respect to our weakness. Perfect refining is for another world, for the world of the souls of perfect men.”* (Sibbes, *A Bruised Reed*: 24-25).

Brothers, you're not here to make perfect people. You're here to help God's people keep believing they're perfected only in and by Christ.

The things that bother folks the most are not eternally significant things. But the effect they have on their souls is huge. They didn't need more law to obey, but assurance that God really cares for them even if they'd sinned there way into a mess.

Learn how to encourage God's people with the gospel: there is forgiveness and freedom for all those who retreat to Jesus for grace and mercy.

**(3) Focus largely on “micro” ministry before “macro” ministry.** I borrow those terms from Timothy Witmer's new book *The Shepherd Leader*.

Macro ministry includes things like constitutions, covenants, doctrinal statements, polity, structure, vision, etc. Things that do not involve particular people.

Micro ministry is the care and ministry provided individual souls, regardless if you have an air-tight doctrinal statement or finely-tuned church covenant.

Guys like us love macro ministry. But Jesus loves micro ministry.

Jesus *“calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. . . . I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf*

*snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know my own and my own know me”* (Jn 10.3, 11-14).

We want to be like Jesus. We want to know sheep by name. We shepherd sheep, not sheep pens. We want to care more about the sheep than the sheep pen so that when it gets hard we don't bolt for greener pastures. If we don't care for the individual sheep then we're not going to care about leaving them to the wolves when our macro ministry doesn't go as planned.

I'm not suggesting those macro, big picture, corporate issues aren't important. They are. But, they're not nearly as important as the care for souls. And we can spend all our time mending holes in sheep pens that the sheep starve.

A good shepherd will so care for the sheep that they'll remain nearby even though a hole is still in the fence. Earn their love and trust (micro ministry) and then fix the hole (macro ministry).

So, you're going to want to make macro concerns top priority in your churches. Right polity. Faithful constitutions. Biblical covenants. Church discipline. Get rid of most the deacons. Chunk the altar call. You'll be tempted to think anything less is being unfaithful to the gospel and Jesus.

And your sheep will starve and you'll get frustrated. It may not be personal to you, but those things will be terribly personal to them. You will snuff out dimly burning wicks and bruise delicate reeds. You'll either get fired or leave, and the church will react even further from the biblical ideals you'd hoped to achieve.

Resolve yourself to micro ministry and trust God to shape individual hearts so that when the opportunity comes to shape macro ministry, it will be done healthily.

**(4) Think decades/generations rather than weeks/years.** I'm not sure how to convince 20-somethings of this (I couldn't be) but you'll have to learn this at some point.

You'll be tempted to think if you don't get a church turned around ASAP then you're failing as a gospel minister. To that Paul would say, *“For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think”* (Rom 12.3). In other words, here this gracious word (you'll either believe it the hard way or the easy way!): do not think so highly of yourself that the church depends on you.

Do you not believe that if Jesus wanted the church perfected tomorrow he is not more than able to make it happen? Guys like us come and go. Christendom does not depend on whether or not we get things in ship-shape tomorrow.

You're here to help a wandering people stay faithful on their way home. They'll be perfected then. But until then we merely help them hope and believe in the gospel.

We hope to hand down to our children and grandchildren a faithful, persevering, hopeful, joyfully-suffering church.

**(5) Recover simple personal discipleship.** There is an elephant-in-the-room in most of our churches. Professing Christians simply do not know their Bibles. They know programs and campaigns and personalities. But they don't know their Bibles.

They may not even know the books of the Bible, They don't know the major moves of redemptive history. They don't have a solid feel for the nature of progressive revelation. They haven't developed a biblical theology à la Stephen or Philip (Acts 7-8), who can take someone from Abraham to Christ or Isaiah to Christ.

And they certainly don't have much confidence in bringing Scripture to bear on their particular life situation. If they don't know how God's word impacted the authors' generations then how can we know how it affects ours? Often, God's people are left with one-liners and cute stories.

It's ironic that in an age where there are more “discipleship” resources available at the click of a mouse, the majority of God's people don't feel discipled. I hear from men all the time: “I've never had someone to just sit down and work through Scripture with me.” I hear from women all the time, “I've not had older women invest in my life.”

We've had great programs and events, but little of the 1 Timothy 2.2 variety: *The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*

We've experience little of the Titus 2.1-8 variety: *But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine. Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.*

I encourage you to make it of first priority to meet with men. God has put his Spirit in them and therefore they hunger for God's word and desire discipleship.

Don't hold a men's conference or some big men's rally. Get to know the men of your church.

Know where they work. Know their homes. Pray for insight into those men who you can meet regularly with and invest in.

God's discipleship “program” is quite simple: older brothers investing in younger men and older sisters investing in younger ladies. You will have to be part recovering that model so that our kids will not have the same complaint we've had.

## **CONCLUSION**

Brothers, in ended this I'm afraid I should've shared five different things with you. We've barely put our pinky toe in the shallow end. God be praised for whatever benefit you may derive.

Whatever the case, I pray you'll strive to be ordinary. Be an ordinary, faithful, hard-working, life-losing, soul-shepherding pastor. Trust that the greatest commendation will come when “*The chief Shepherd appears and you will receive the unfading crown of glory*” (1 Pt 5.4). Thanks for your time and undeserved attention.