



The Encouraging Pastor

Uplifting God's people

John Benton

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Introduction

The NT idea of encouragement covers a variety of meanings – from chasing and chivvying people to get on with what they ought to be doing, to helping them stay true to Christ come what may, right through to tenderly comforting the crushed and broken hearted. And although all Christians are directed to ‘encourage one another’, 1 Thessalonians 4.18, it is particularly Christian leaders who have the duty of encouraging God’s people, Acts 14.22.

We find Paul specifically sending his fellow minister Tychicus to the Colossian church with this commission, ‘I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts’, Colossians 4.8.

Although ‘encouragement’ does cover a range of ideas, this booklet will mostly focus on the area of a pastor uplifting and comforting people. One obvious reason for this is that all forms of encouragement are connected. Unless you are seen to care for folk, they are unlikely to take your challenges, chivvying and correction well. A lopsided ministry which is all challenge and no cheer, is rarely helpful or very fruitful in the churches.¹

A need for comfort

And Christians tend to be much in need of caring motivation and uplifting. They are in spiritual war. They often need their wounds tended to and their morale boosting.

As a young man in ministry, I was given the opportunity to work alongside Bob Horn, at Evangelicals Now, as a part-time assistant editor. He would sometimes ask me about my preaching and offer advice. One thing he said, for example, was that his own approach to deciding on what to speak when preaching away from his home church was this: ‘preach to comfort and uplift.’ Why? There are so many devilish attacks on our faith, Ephesians 6.12, and temptations in the world to bring Christians down, that almost the one thing you can be sure of about the unknown congregation to which you are to preach is that there will be a number of saints there who need encouraging. So, preach not so much to challenge and bruise, but to comfort God’s people.

¹ Of course, the opposite is also a problem. To be all comfort with no correction often leads to indiscipline. But as a young preacher I certainly found it much easier to lash my hearers than to build them up.

If this is true when we ‘preach away’, it is also true that a church will look to their own pastor to have a large slice of uplifting encouragement in his regular ministry.

I found this advice so needful personally. As a brash young preacher full of zeal, it was easy to fall into a style of preaching which was a ranting upbraiding of the older generation focusing on their failures. But it takes far more wisdom and spiritual maturity to so describe the glories of the Lord Jesus that hearts are comforted such that congregations are inspired and yearn to honour Christ more. An uplifting sight of his love is what brings about real change for the better.

But it’s not just about people in the church, it’s about outsiders too.

The encouraging church

There is a painting that haunts me. It is by a man who happens to share my surname. It is called ‘Prodigal Son’ by Thomas Hart Benton. There are some wonderful depictions of Jesus’ parable which capture the grace, pardon and deep joy of the son’s return – the painting by Rembrandt immediately springs to mind. But this one is very different. Coming out of the background of the Great Depression in 1930s United States, Benton pictures a penniless son returning to his old home only to find the old house, derelict and empty. The father is not there. The fattened calf is a skeleton in the dust. He has come home to nothing but a cold chill and hopelessness.

For me this is a devastating comment on some churches. Any sinner seeking to find their way back to God is likely, at some stage to go to what should be God’s house – a church. But what do they find when they summon up the courage to go there? Praise the Lord they often do find a welcome and gospel love and encouragement. But that, sadly, is far from being always the case. Often, they find the opposite. The church door opens onto formality, self-righteousness, finger-pointing and people who take little or no interest in them – even if the church is 1689 Baptist, FIEC or Westminster Confession! In other words, like Thomas Hart Benton’s picture, they find no encouragement but instead coldness and spiritual dereliction.

Hopefully, by contrast, an encouraging gospel pastor will nurture a very different kind of church. He will be used by God to raise an encouraging church – a church where sinners are welcome and can find a home. It will be a church where

people hold the truth, love one another and where God is at home. Just as all the sinners and tax-collectors felt drawn to Jesus, Luke 15.1,2, hopefully a church full of gospel encouragement – that God has forgiveness and grace for every sin and the people are full of that grace – will provide true warmth, a home for sinners, properly representing the Father’s lavish welcome for all the prodigals.

So, under God, what makes for a preacher with a natural bent towards being uplifting and encouraging? Here are seven suggestions.

1: A pastor who loves Christ

It is out of your own love for Jesus that you will have a spirit to teach others in an encouraging way. Remember John 21.15. Jesus asks Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ And that question of love for Christ is, as you know, repeated 3 times. It is that which not only shows Peter’s repentance for his denials of Jesus on the eve of the cross, but also fits him to be restored to his apostolic ministry of caring for God’s people. So, immediately Jesus replies, ‘Feed my lambs’.

Our own experience

And love for Christ emerges from our own experience of his love for us, 1 John 4.19. We taste the love of Christ in our own lives through his grace and that enflames our hearts with love for him. And that love for him is infectious and will come across in our preaching and indeed in all our dealings with the flock God has put under our care.

Therefore, the *first* thing that is staring us straight in the face here is that the church needs a converted ministry. It needs pastors who are truly born again of God’s Spirit. In other words, it needs men who truly love the Lord Jesus. Without love for Christ, actually the preacher is a hypocrite, and a curse is on him, 1 Corinthians 16.22. Still today there are men who seem to see the ministry simply as a nice career. They appear to love the idea of ministry more than they love Christ. Such a man’s ministry is unlikely to be comforting or encouraging. It instead will be rather formal and mechanical and will produce only formal religion for it will not touch the heart.

The *second* thing that is clear here is that as pastors we need to do all in our power to continually renew our affection for the Lord Jesus Christ – and that will happen as we taste his grace in our own lives. Here is the repentant Peter, knowing that for his denials of Jesus he deserves to be cast out. But instead, he is received and restored like the prodigal son in Jesus’ great parable! It is this kind of experience of the felt grace of God which will fan our love for Christ into a flame.

This leads us back to our personal devotions. We must ‘keep our hearts’, Proverbs 4.23, When I first started the work of supporting pastors with Pastors’ Academy, I spent an afternoon with Marcus Honeysett (who heads up Living Leadership). One of the things he said that stuck with me was, ‘John, so many

pastors only read the Bible to make sermons – not to simply feed their own souls’. Then he used an illustration of a cup and saucer. The pastor is the cup. The church is the saucer. What ought to happen on Sundays is that the cup is so full of the grace of Christ that in the exposition of God’s word, it overflows into the congregation from the pulpit. But so often that’s not how it is. ‘Men have drilled a hole in the cup’, said Marcus. The word of grace may to some extent flow through them – but it has hardly touched the sides. The message is not a eulogy for Christ from the pastor’s heart, but a mere performance.

A pastor without a limp

The *third* point that emerges here is that it is no bad thing sometimes for a pastor to remind himself of his sins and his inadequacies in ministry. When we are convicted afresh of our failures, humbled to our knees, we are in the best position to appreciate the grace and love of the Lord Jesus anew. We hear the voice of Jesus say, ‘My grace is sufficient for you’, and we know that means us personally, 2 Corinthians 12.9. Our thorns in the flesh show us the extent to which Christ has loved us and though all undeserving, has upheld us. We taste his love and our hearts are melted again! And then we are ready to preach in a way that will melt other hearts too. For this reason, it has often been said (metaphorically), ‘Beware of a pastor without a limp’. Let’s love Jesus Christ.

2: A pastor with a father's heart

You see this in 1 Thessalonians 2.11, 12. 'For you know 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'. This was Paul's assertion towards the people of the new church in Thessalonica which was now suffering persecution for their faith. It was with the attitude of a father towards the church that Paul comforted and urged them. There is a reference to motherly gentleness too in v7.

Family

Let me ask you – do you love your people? Do you love them like a father? You see, though we have no wish to be called 'father', Matthew 23.9, there is something fatherly about a true minister. That's why we read concerning the qualifications for church leadership, 1 Timothy 3.4,5, 'He must manage his own family well.' If a man has been a good father to his own children there is a good chance he will prove a good father to the people of the church.

Two proven abilities are required for good church leadership according to 1 Timothy 3. You need to be able to teach. But you also need to be a people person – as shown by your husband and parental skills within your family.

Some preachers have no real concern about who they preach to – as long as they have an audience – any audience will do. But an encouraging pastor knows his people and cares for them like his own family. His heart is engaged with them. This is not just a job to him.

The tie that binds

I think I have got the story right – but I was told that the well-known Christian song *Blessed be the tie that binds* (our hearts in Christian love) – was written in 1772 as John Fawcett had accepted a call to another church which had offered him a higher salary. His own church, I think at Wainsgate, tried to match the bigger salary but simply couldn't. So, they simply begged him to stay – and such was his love for them he changed his mind and stayed – turning down the higher salary. The tie that bound him to his people was too strong and he just could not leave them.

It's when people know that a pastor has a real devotion to them – and knows

each one of them personally – and cares for them in their ups and downs as we would for our own children – that people are encouraged. Such a pastor looks out for any opportunities to say how much people are appreciated. If your own child had done well at something – perhaps in the stage play at school or on the football field – you would say ‘well done – proud of you.’ Just so – before going to church on Sunday morning pastor, spend a little time thinking about things you can say ‘well done’ for to different people.

Don't take them for granted

There are some church leaders who are more at home with telling people what to do than with encouraging them. They are managers rather than fathers. They fail to encourage and celebrate willing servants. And in that situation loyalty gets turned into being taken for granted. Keen Christians are made to feel worthless.

By contrast we find the apostle Paul is always ready to mention in his letters how much he is indebted to those who have helped him or supported him in ministry. As just one example of this we can think of the final chapter of the epistle to the Romans. It is filled not just with names but with public commendations of his helpers. Priscilla and Aquilla had risked their lives for him, v4. Mary, ‘worked very hard for you’, v6. Andronicus and Junias, well-known to the apostles, had shared a prison sentence with him, v7. Tryphena and Tryphosa were women who worked hard alongside him, v12. The mother of Rufus (wife of Simon of Cyrene? cf Mark 15.21) had been like a mother to Paul, v13. And the list goes on. He does not take them for granted. He celebrates these folk.

To take dedicated people for granted could not be further from the attitude of a caring parent. It is a terrible trap for an eldership to fall into and can bring much avoidable discouragement to a church. It has wrecked the hearts of too many well-meaning Christians to go unchallenged. What kind of pastor are you in this matter?

3: A pastor who grows people

He has a concern not so much to control people as to see them develop.

Some church leaders try to run their church as if it were a business project. They want things done their way – or else. Their concern is control – to be in charge. But that is highly likely to become oppressive for others. Yes, there has to be discipline in a church, when necessary, when people have gone astray and are unrepentant. But that is just the boundary wall to stop people going off the path. The question is, where are you taking these people? Where does the path lead? What journey are they on with you, pastor? Hopefully they are on their way to heaven, but where else are you leading them?

Prepared for service

Listen to Paul's description of what our ministries ought to be about, Ephesians 4.11, 12. 'It was him (the ascended Lord Jesus Christ) who gave ...some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'. Ministry should prepare people for their own ministries. Listen again to the apostle's prayer for Christian people in Colossians 1.10. He is praying that they may be given spiritual wisdom, knowledge and understanding (presumably through being taught) 'in order that you might live a life worthy of the Lord...bearing fruit in every good work'. He aims at them pleasing the Lord by producing their own fruit for God – in holiness and in loving deeds.

So, ministry isn't firstly about control – 'what I want is a church which does as the elders say'. It is about growing people and bringing them to maturity. It is about seeing potential in people and helping them to develop in godly character and gifting to the glory of God. Do you have that kind of pastoral outlook? A good pastor doesn't want to squash people any more than a good father wants to squash his own children. He wants to nurture them until they can stand on their own two feet and not be forever dependent on him. (But sadly, that is what some pastors want – making people forever dependent on them feeds their own ego!).

From Simon to Peter

Think about Andrew bringing his brother Simon to Jesus, John 1.40-42. They were both ordinary fishermen. But Jesus sees them as 'fishers of men', Mark

1.17. What does Jesus say to Simon? 'You are Simon, but you shall be Peter – the Rock'. It was as if Jesus could see past all the sin, foolishness and failure in Simon to what he could become under God. 'Simon I can see potential in you!' Imagine the boost, the encouragement that must have been to Simon! And pastors should be looking to see the potential in their people and encourage them on to maturity, Colossians 1.28,29. Each one of the folk in your church is a sinner, but each one is also made in God's image – a child of God. Develop their potential.

And we see Paul passing this same vision on to his 'son' Timothy as he exhorts him to pursue leadership training. 'And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others', 2 Timothy 2.2.

Don't despair

Now, I confess that busy pastors are often so overwhelmed with the regular work of the ministry that they may find it hard to carve out time to meet with people one-to-one or in small groups. This is true especially the case if they are single-handed in the work. I sympathise. But if you are in that position don't despair. You are not a failure because you can't afford time for one-to-one training. Rather you are to see that the whole of your teaching ministry, Sunday by Sunday will fulfil this training function as you clearly, enthusiastically and accurately expound the word of God.

You will be surprised to find down the years, not only church members deliberately wanting to get more involved in service in the church, but you will be amazed that even young men approach the leaders feeling a call to ministry and a desire to be sent to Bible college. Your ministry has encouraged them into service.

Of course, the corollary is that where this doesn't happen there is something deficient in a pastor's ministry. That may be about a lack of encouragement.

4: A pastor who teaches Scripture

This in a sense should go without saying. What is going to see sinners born again and saints built up? It is the Bible – the word of God. Scripture must be central in the church and in your ministry pastor.

The Emmaus Road

And when that word is humbly opened up to the glory of God and the exaltation of Christ, what happens? We think of that post-resurrection journey with the stranger who, beginning with Moses and the Prophets, explained the Bible's great theme to the discouraged travellers. Later they commented, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us and opened the Scriptures to us?' Luke 24.32. The disciples were encouraged in their faith – thrilled and excited.

You might write this off saying, 'Well, that was just the special historical instance on the Emmaus Road'. But I say that Jesus still speaks today to people through pastors and preachers as with the help of the Holy Spirit they explain the Scriptures, Ephesians 2.17. What happens when the Lord is with us as we open up the word? Look at Ephesians 5.26. It speaks of the church being 'cleansed by the washing with water through the word.' People feel refreshed. They feel as if they have just been in a lovely spiritual shower and, just as our bodies feel refreshed and revitalised after a shower, their souls feel refreshed. They are encouraged by 'the word'. If you would be an encouraging pastor, then you must teach the joyous gospel that we find in the Bible.

Spiritual conflict

When the Lord Jesus was hard pressed with temptation by the devil in the wilderness, he quoted, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God', Matthew 4.4. How are people to be fed and built up spiritually? It is by Scripture – the word of God. How are they to be strengthened for the spiritual conflict they will inevitably face? It is by Scripture. And notice it is not just Scripture they need but, 'every word' of it, cf. 2 Timothy 3.16,17. Pastor, you have a big syllabus to teach. Maybe you can't expound every book of the Bible in a short period. But you do need to encourage and strengthen your people by giving them a thorough grasp of its whole content.

Double listening

How is Scripture to be taught? John Stott, the great twentieth century Anglican preacher, spoke about the need for a 'double listening' on the part of pastors. He said we need to listen to God's word, but also need to listen to our contemporary world. He was not saying that the gospel or the word of God should be changed with time or culture. Jesus said that though heaven and earth pass away his word would not, Luke 21.33. The word of God does not change. But because the world changes the way we apply the word most effectively will change too.

Take as an example the phenomenon of social media. It presents many temptations and problems for children and parents which previous generations never knew. The Bible does have the answer to questions thrown up by social media. But the preacher needs to listen. He needs to know what those questions are which vex his people and he needs to think carefully about how to address those questions honestly and thoroughly from Scripture. So, he needs to know his Bible very well. God's word needs to be applied clearly into the precise situations God's people face.

How this encourages people

This is actually standard fare for the NT. Think of the NT epistles. These are not simply general pieces of Christian theology and application. Each letter addresses a particular set of circumstances. In Galatians, for example, it is the threat of legalism which robs us of the free grace of God. In 1 Peter, the apostle addresses how Christians are to handle persecution. The letters to the seven churches in Revelation are tailor made for the different cultures and circumstances where the churches are located. So, a pastor needs to study hard and to know the spiritual condition of his people and what they are facing in the world and so be able to speak with the authority of God's word into their lives.

And when this happens people are tremendously uplifted, comforted and encouraged. Why? It is because they realise afresh, God is speaking to them. God knows all about them and cares for them. 'Through the pastor, God is addressing just my situation!' We feel the Good Shepherd is among us and has his loving and caring eye upon us. So, pastor – prayerfully dig deep into Scripture – and you will get excited about what you find there. And that excitement will communicate itself to your congregation.

5: A pastor who sets a good example

Let me take you back to Ephesians 4.11, 12: 'It was he who gave...some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'.

Do you notice that people and the church are not built up directly by the preaching. There is a step between the preaching and the building up. What is it? It is v12, those works of service. Teaching only prepares God's people. We want people to be excited by the great teachings of Scripture but having been uplifted we want them to put the things they have learned into practice. The word must be lived out. To hear Christ's teaching but not do it is actually a very grave mistake, as Jesus taught at the end of his Sermon on the Mount in the parable of the two builders, Matthew 7.24-27. It ends in a disastrous crash!

Practising what you preach.

Therefore, we need ask, how can a pastor best encourage his people to put what he teaches them from God's word into practice? It's a no brainer. The answer is by living it out himself. The NT is very clear about this. The apostle Paul writes, 'Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me – put it into practice', Philippians 4.9. The writer of Hebrews says, 'Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith', Hebrews 13.7.

It was the Pharisees who did not practise what they preached and so showed themselves to be hypocrites, Matthew 23.3. Of course, no pastor will be perfect in this. But where we fail, we need to repent and seek forgiveness from the Lord. We must continually aim, with God's help, to be true Christians who are worth copying.

Seeing the sermon

People find it much easier to put something into practice if they can see an example of what they are expected to do. Pastor, you and your elders are especially meant to give such an example.

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.
The eye is a better pupil, more willing than the ear;

Fine counsel is confusing, but example always clear,
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see a good in action is what everybody needs. (Edgar Guest)

Leading by example

This translates into a pastor leading by example, just as the Lord Jesus did both in service by washing the disciples' feet and by taking up the cross, literally as he took the Calvary Road.

This is to be the case broadly, but also specifically. It is a great sadness when leadership teams come up with all kinds of schemes which they push church members to get involved in, but when it comes to it, they, the leaders, are missing. No. Set the example, in weeks of prayer, and the chapel spring clean and visiting the local homes, and passing out tracts, and putting on a meal for the elderly. Pull your weight. Be there among the flock with a cheery word.

But more importantly still, set the example by your godly character. 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, in purity', 1 Timothy 4.12. It was said of the great Puritan preacher Richard Sibbes that 'heaven was in him before he was in heaven.' Such was the 'love, joy and peace', the 'faith, hope and charity' of the man that people were blessed just to be in his presence. They felt uplifted, not just by his wonderful sermons but just by being with him. A pastor like that has enormous influence for good upon his people. That is because they can see that Christ and the glorious world to come are real because they see their reality in him. How encouraging is that! O, let us aspire and strive to be such examples to God's people who have been entrusted to our care.

6: A pastor who prays for people

The Church began with a promise and prayer, Acts 1.5, 14. And bearing this in mind, prayer becomes the best reason for every church to be encouraged. It has been said that there is nothing God can do which can't be achieved through heaven directed prayer.

The Lord Jesus promised the Father's gift of the Spirit to those early disciples and following the Ascension those disciples humbled themselves and prayed. They knew that without Jesus they could not achieve anything, John 15.5. They had been told not to begin their mission to the world until the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, was poured out upon them. But they did not simply wait and twiddle their thumbs. They gave themselves to fervent prayer until the Day of Pentecost came with the power of heaven.

We, today, are given a very similar promise by the Lord Jesus. 'How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him,' Luke 11.13. A church of whatever size, which is enthusiastic and believing about the power of prayer in Jesus' name is really going somewhere. God answers such prayer. Therefore, if a pastor can truly encourage and get his whole church excited about prayer, he has lit a spiritual fire which nothing on earth can overcome.

Praying for people who will pray

Every pastor must pray for his people. That is part of his work. He must pray for their protection, encouragement and growth in grace. However, in these days it is particularly necessary for church leaders to pray for their people to become people who are serious about prayer – Christians devoted to prayer, Colossians 4.2. Contemporary evangelicalism has shrunk the Christian life to attendance at church on Sunday morning, reading some daily Bible notes and offering a brief prayer on the way to work. Rarely are those of Generation X or Millennials committed to the church prayer meeting. Yet this is the very source of all the church's power. It is very hard to shift those Christians out of their neglectful routines. Therefore, pastor and elders, pray that they would change. Pray they would get a vision for prayer. Pray for your people to become people of deep and committed prayer – worshippers who wait on God. You must pray for all your members, especially the difficult ones! Philippians 1.4, 7, 8.

Our sovereign God

True prayer both submits to and trusts in the goodness of the sovereign God. The church knows that God will answer in his own wonderful way and in his own best time. His loving sovereignty should mean that confidence in God will overflow. There can be an atmosphere in the church that (in the words of John Newton) 'through the love of God our Saviour all will be well; free and changeless is his favour, all will be well.'

And we must believe that even when things appear to have gone wrong or the Lord seems not to be listening to us, John 11.6. The Lord will never leave us or forsake us, and he knows better than we do. Such prayer in times of difficulty can be a terrific struggle, a real wrestling match with the powers of darkness who press us to unbelief and to doubt God's goodness. Paul commends pastor Epaphras who was a 'servant of Christ Jesus...always struggling on your behalf in his prayers that you may stand firm, mature and fully assured in the will of God', Colossians 4.12. Such battling prayer is particularly the responsibility of pastors and elders.

Of course, such prayer is arduous and takes time. It is probably best if a pastor sets up a specific routine for interceding for his church and its individuals. Since such prayer is often tough – mentally as well as physically – a pastor must also pace himself. It is a vital part of his work. To engage in spiritual work without spiritual power from heaven will not get us anywhere. Beware of a semi-secular approach to the work of the ministry where technique and 'how to' publications replace the Holy Spirit's power.

John Calvin encourages us

As pastors and church leaders we must learn to pray beyond the sick list. We must learn to use fervent prayer as our chief means of seeing the kingdom of God come among us. In his *Institutes*, the great Reformer John Calvin, in a marvellous passage, gives us tremendous inspiration to pray:

'Wherefore, although it is true that while we are listless or insensible to our wretchedness, (God) wakes and watches for us and sometimes even assists us unasked. It is very much for our interest to be constantly supplicating Him: first, that our heart may always be inflamed with a serious and ardent desire of seeking, loving, and serving Him, while we accustom ourselves to have recourse to Him as a sacred anchor in every necessity; secondly, that no desires, no longing whatever, of which we are ashamed to make Him the witness, may enter

our minds, while we learn to place all our wishes in His sight and thus pour out our heart before Him; and, lastly, that we may be prepared to receive all His benefits with true gratitude and thanksgiving, while our prayers remind us that they proceed from His hand. Moreover, having obtained what we asked, being persuaded that He has answered our prayers, we are led to long more earnestly for His favour, and at the same time have greater pleasure in welcoming the blessings that we perceive to have been obtained by our prayers. Lastly, use and experience confirm the thought of His providence in our minds in a manner adapted to our weakness, when we understand that He not only promises that He will never fail us, and spontaneously gives us access to approach Him in every time of need, but has His hand always stretched out to assist His people, not amusing them with words, but proving Himself to be a present aid.'

7: A pastor who thanks God for his people

It is a great privilege to be a pastor. God has entrusted to you two of his most precious things on earth – his truth and his church (the bride of Christ). We should thank him for that.

But further, God has given us to care for this part of his family – and many of them are wonderful people. The apostle Paul tells the Philippians that, ‘I thank my God every time I remember you’, Philippians 1.3. It is a privilege to serve Christ. It is a privilege to know those whose lives God has touched. Often, they are so full of love and willingness to sacrifice for the cause of Christ. Further it is right to be thankful for the difficult ones – even the very difficult ones – firstly because they are often the means of God sanctifying you and secondly because those difficult ones show you why your church still needs a pastor – you still have a job!

Praying with joy

Paul writes of the church in Philippi, ‘In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy,’ Philippians 1.4. The primary reason for Paul’s joy is what he calls their ‘partnership in the gospel’. In his missionary journeys around the Eastern Mediterranean, it was particularly the people of the church in Philippi who had supported him with gifts of various kinds, so that he didn’t have to work at his tentmaking business but could concentrate his energies on his work for the gospel. In that sense they were his partners. And similarly, it is the gifts of the people of your church, pastor, who have enabled you to give up your secular work and enjoy the privilege of being a pastor and gospel preacher. It is only right to be thankful for them.

We see immediately how out of place is the pastor who is always complaining about his people. Yet sadly, there are such pastors. It is not right and actually brings a depressing atmosphere to a church. Let’s be thankful for our people. They may not be the best congregation in the world, but they are your sheep and enable you to fulfil your high calling.

‘Auntie Crack’

It is true that a thankful pastor is an encouraging pastor. Thankful people are encouraging people.

When I first started ministry in Guildford there were many older people to visit. Some of them were quite cantankerous. I was not what they wanted in a 'Strict Baptist' pastor. But among the list of people to visit was Miss Cracknell (known as 'Auntie Crack'). She was probably in her eighties and lived in a ground floor flat owned by our Association of churches. She had been a missionary in India (through the 1950s and 1960s) – I think up towards the Himalayas. She had run a home for girls – and done her best for them. By the time I knew her, many had married and were by then scattered all across the world. Auntie Crack, now she was retired, spent her days keeping up correspondence with them providing Bible wisdom. She encouraged them to keep going with Christ. She had turned down marriage herself in order to follow the Lord's calling – but she could look back upon a life well spent in His service and she was always so thankful. Compared with many of the other afternoon visits, it was always a joy to visit this thankful saint. I was very thankful for her.

Thankfulness and encouragement

My point is that, similarly, church members generally delight in a visit from a pastor who is thankful and thankful for them in particular. A thankful pastor is an encouraging pastor. He brings light into a home. It is so refreshing to meet up with a person who is full of thanks. It is lack of thanks to God which is the mark of the ungodly, Romans 1.21. Out in the world people are full of complaints – about their marriage partners, their children, their bosses, the government etc. It is such a contrast to come across a positive, thankful soul. Pastor, try to make sure that you are such a positive soul.

After all, if we believe the gospel, we have every reason to be thankful. 'Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like thee his praise should sing!' Let's be those who are always ready to praise the everlasting King.

Conclusion

We had been trying to support small local churches in our Association from the church where I was pastor, simply by a few folk visiting every Sunday morning to let them know they mattered. We prayed much for these little congregations which had come on hard times. Nothing much seemed to happen, though they did enjoy seeing people take an interest.

Just recently I had a report from one of these churches. Tucked away in a back street in a small town, humanly speaking, it seemed that nothing could ever happen except slow decline. But that has not been the case! A new pastor had the guts to take on the work and in the last year there have been conversions and several baptisms. More than that, a number of families have joined the church. The prayers of previous years are being answered.

It brought to mind the all-sufficiency of Jesus. In the feeding of the 5,000, he spreads a feast in the wilderness – in Scripture a picture of barrenness, far from God's blessing. Of course, he is the LORD who is our Great Shepherd who can turn our very limited resources – 5 loaves and 2 fishes – into abundance. He is God who made the universe, John 1.3, 4. What can he not do? This is the bottom line of why a pastor can encourage his church as he walks with Jesus.

And where the risen Jesus sets the banquet there is more than enough for all – and basketfuls left over. That means that the church can be spiritually fed and the returning prodigal sons and daughters will not find the Father's house empty and derelict. Through the gospel and the gracious love of God's people they will find the Father runs to embrace them and envelope them in his love. They will find that they have come home.

So, rooted in the living Lord Jesus, seek to be an encouraging pastor!