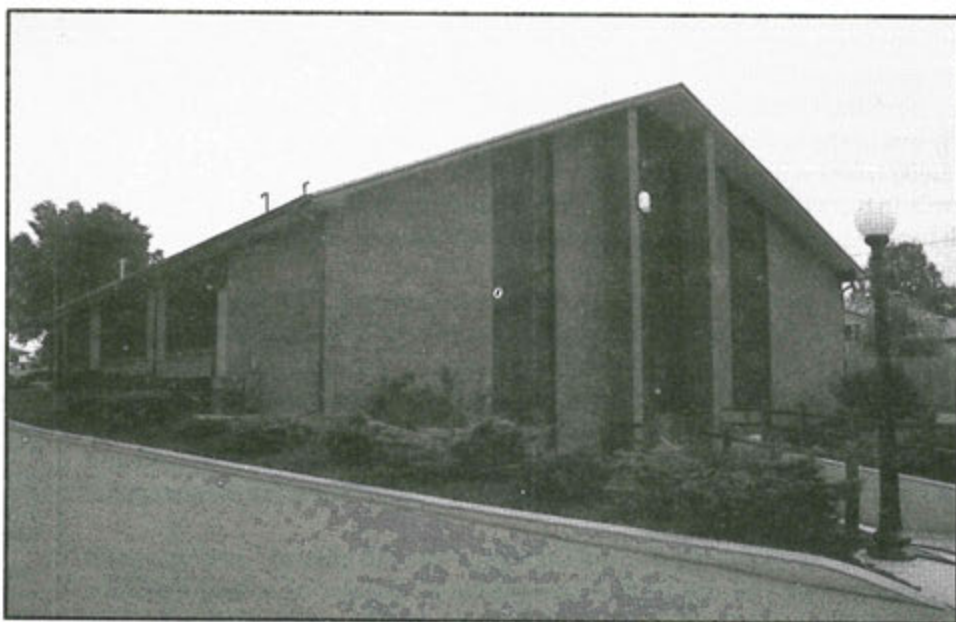


# *THE* **STANDARD BEARER**

**A Reformed  
Semi-Monthly  
Magazine**

---

Special Issue: **SHEPHERDING GOD'S FLOCK**



**Loveland Protestant Reformed Church**

Loveland, Colorado

Site of

**Officebearers' Conference, Classis West,**  
September 1, 1992

---

*Vol. 69, No. 11*  
*March 1, 1993*



<b>Called to Be Pastors</b>	
Rev. Ronald H. Hanko .....	243
<b>Has the Emphasis on Pastoral Counseling Gone Too Far?</b>	
Rev. Ronald L. Cammenga .....	245
<b>Dealing with the Depressed</b>	
Rev. Carl J. Haak .....	249
<b>Does Psychiatry Have a Place in the Pastoral Ministry?</b>	
Rev. Russell J. Dykstra .....	251
<b>The Role of the Elders and Deacons in Pastoral Care</b>	
Mr. Robert Brands .....	254
<b>Ministering to the Terminally Ill</b>	
Rev. Michael J. DeVries .....	257
<b>Pastoral Care Among Teenagers</b>	
Rev. Steven R. Key .....	260

## Report on the Officebearers' Conference

Everett VanVoorthuysen

On September 1, 1992 an Officebearers' Conference was held in the Loveland Protestant Reformed Church. This conference was held in conjunction with the meeting of Classis West the next day. The theme of the conference was "Shepherding God's Flock." In attendance were all the delegates of Classis West, several members of the Loveland congregation, a few ministers and an elder from the Orthodox Presbyterian Churches in the Denver area and Rev. Hargrove of the Sovereign Grace Church in Spokane, Washington (who drove the 1,400 miles with Rev. Haak and his elder). We greeted one another very warmly in front of Loveland's new church building on a beautiful Colorado day with blue sky and fluffy white clouds, and the majestic Rocky Mountains just a few miles away.

We assembled inside at 9 A.M. to hear the keynote address of Rev. Ron Hanko: "Called to be Pastors." Among other things, Rev. Hanko emphasized that elders as well as ministers are called to be pastors (1 Pet. 5:1, 2). He pointed out in this connection that the first calling or duty of the minister is to preach the Word. Faithful preaching is essential in shepherding God's flock. He noted, too, that ministers and elders must be men of prayer, men who love God and the flock and know their calling, and know that they are there for the sheep, not the sheep there for them.

After the keynote address and the "question and answer" session which followed, we enjoyed the first of several coffee breaks, at which delicious refreshments were served by some of the women of Loveland Church. (No wonder that, whenever I attend classis or synod, I gain about five pounds).

After morning coffee we had our first two sectional sessions. Choosing which to attend was, in every case, difficult. I very much desired to hear all of the speakers and participate in every question and answer period; but that is manifestly impossible when two are going on at the same time. Printed copies of the papers were made available, and these also appear in this issue of the *Standard Bearer*, but it's not quite like being there.

Besides the presentations and discussions themselves, there is the added attraction of communion and fellowship of the saints at these officebearers' conferences. The latter, it seems to me, are so much appreciated in Classis West because great distances between the various churches make it difficult for officebearers to see each other more than twice a year. I heartily recommend that the conferences be continued. Those who plan them and contribute to them should be commended for their efforts.

# THE STANDARD BEARER

ISSN 0362-4692

Semi-monthly, except monthly during June, July, and August.  
Published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association, Inc.,  
4949 Ivanrest Ave., Grandville, MI 49418. Second Class  
Postage Paid at Grandville, Michigan.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the Standard Bearer,  
P.O. Box 603, Grandville, MI 49468-0603.

#### EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Editor: Prof. David J. Engelsma  
Secretary: Prof. Robert D. Decker  
Managing Editor: Mr. Don Doezeema

#### DEPARTMENT EDITORS

Rev. Ronald Cammenga, Prof. Robert Decker, Rev. Arie  
den Hartog, Rev. Barry Gritters, Mr. Fred Hanko, Prof. Herman  
Hanko, Rev. John Heys, Rev. Steven Key, Rev. Kenneth  
Kool, Rev. Jason Kortering, Rev. Dale Kuiper, Mr. James  
Lanting, Rev. George Lubbers, Mrs. Mary Beth Lubbers, Rev.  
James Slopeema, Rev. Charles Terpstra, Rev. Gise VanBaren,  
Rev. Ronald VanOverloop, Mr. Benjamin Wigger, Rev. Bernard  
Woudenberg.

#### EDITORIAL OFFICE

The Standard Bearer  
4949 Ivanrest  
Grandville, MI 49418

#### BUSINESS OFFICE

The Standard Bearer  
Don Doezeema  
P.O. Box 603  
Grandville, MI  
49468-0603

PH: (616) 538-1778

(616) 531-1490

FAX: (616) 531-3033

#### CHURCH NEWS EDITOR

Mr. Ben Wigger  
6597 40th Ave.  
Hudsonville, MI 49426  
NEW ZEALAND OFFICE  
The Standard Bearer  
c/o Protestant Reformed  
Church  
B. VanHerik  
66 Fraser St.  
Wainuiomata, New Zealand

#### EDITORIAL POLICY

Every editor is solely responsible for the contents of his own  
articles. Contributions of general interest from our readers and  
questions for The Reader Asks department are welcome.  
Contributions will be limited to approximately 300 words and  
must be neatly written or typewritten, and must be signed. Copy  
deadlines are the first and fifteenth of the month. All  
communications relative to the contents should be sent to the  
editorial office.

#### REPRINT POLICY

Permission is hereby granted for the reprinting of articles in our  
magazine by other publications, provided: a) that such reprinted  
articles are reproduced in full; b) that proper acknowledgment  
is made; c) that a copy of the periodical in which such reprint  
appears is sent to our editorial office.

#### SUBSCRIPTION POLICY

Subscription price: \$12.00 per year in the U.S., \$15.00  
elsewhere. Unless a definite request for discontinuance is  
received, it is assumed that the subscriber wishes the  
subscription to continue, and he will be billed for renewal. If you  
have a change of address, please notify the Business Office as  
early as possible in order to avoid the inconvenience of  
interrupted delivery. Include your Zip or Postal Code.

#### ADVERTISING POLICY

The Standard Bearer does not accept commercial advertising  
of any kind. Announcements of church and school events,  
anniversaries, obituaries, and sympathy resolutions will be  
placed for a \$3.00 fee. These should be sent to the Business  
Office and should be accompanied by the \$3.00 fee. Deadline  
for announcements is at least one month prior to publication  
date.

#### BOUND VOLUMES

The Business Office will accept standing orders for bound  
copies of the current volume. Such orders are filled as soon as  
possible after completion of a volume year.

16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm and 105mm microfiche, and  
article copies are available through University Microfilms  
International.



# Called to be Pastors

Rev. Ronald Hanko

Pastoring in the church of Jesus Christ is a work that has many different facets. As nearly everyone knows, the word "pastor" means "shepherd." Pastoral work, then, has to do with the work of church officebearers as shepherds. This calling to be shepherds, as we will see, really involves all the work of all the different offices. A complete study of pastoral work, therefore, would involve nothing less than a complete study of the offices of the church.

Because the subject is so large, this article will have to be limited to a few important points concerning those church offices, their duties, and the calling of the officebearers to be shepherds. More particularly, the points covered in this article will be those about which there is likely to be some misunderstanding in the church, either among the officebearers themselves or among the "sheep" they are called to lead.

The first point has to do with *who* are called to be pastors. It needs to be emphasized here that this calling belongs to the elders as well as to the ministers of the church. In fact, a very good case can be made for the idea that the deacons' work is also "pastoral" work, though in their case it is a very specific and limited calling.

That the elders especially are also pastors or shepherds is very clear from Acts 20:28. Here Paul is talking to the elders of the church of Ephesus about their calling, and he tells them that their calling is "to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." The word translated "feed" in the KJV is actually a

word which means "to be a shepherd." The elders are these shepherds of God's people! I Peter 5:1, 2 goes a step further and indicates that the ministers of the Word are shepherds only because they are elders. In other words, the calling to be pastors belongs first of all to the elders!

The elders, then, must have their rightful share of the pastoral work of the church. Many churches today do not have elders at all. There the pastoral work is done solely by the minister or by special "counselors," if it is done at all. But even in Reformed churches the elders do not always have their share of this pastoral work of "shepherding" God's flock, especially in things like sick visitation and counseling. There is, for example, a tendency on the part of the members of the church to think that a pastoral visit from an elder is acceptable only if it is impossible for the minister to come, and even then they would rather have the minister. Sometimes this is the fault of the elders for not knowing their calling, for being unwilling to carry it out, or for not insisting that they be allowed to perform their calling. Sometimes it is the fault of the ministers for "hogging" all this kind of work for themselves.

If God gives this pastoral work to the elders, then both the people and the ministers suffer when the elders do not do their work. Then the flock is really shepherdless! Indeed, in Numbers 11, where elders were first appointed, they were appointed exactly because both Moses and the people were suffering from Moses' inability to do the work of shepherding God's people alone.

What is more, the elders are not only called to do this work, but in many cases they are better equipped to do it because they know the sheep of God better than do the ministers,

having grown up with them and among them. Nor should the elders be afraid of this work. Sometimes, it seems, the elders are fearful of this work, thinking that they will be less effective than the ministers with their theological training. Perhaps that is especially true today when counseling, communications, and such-like nonsense are principal subjects one studies in many seminaries. The elders must remember that God Himself calls them to do their work. And that means that they are called efficaciously, which is to say, that the call itself provides the grace and strength and wisdom that is necessary for the work. Not only that, but the Word is the most important thing in any pastoral work. If they love the Word, and love the sheep, they will be good pastors. So will the ministers and deacons, to whom also this calling belongs.

The second point has to do with the work itself. It must be emphasized here that Scripture has a much broader view of pastoral work than



Rev. Ronald Hanko

Rev. Hanko is missionary-elect to Northern Ireland.



we often do. In Acts 20:28 Paul speaks of the general oversight of the church as part of "feeding the flock of God." In verse 20 of the same chapter, the verse that has been used in Reformed churches to support the practice of family or house visitation, Paul indicates that this bringing the Word "from house to house" is also part of shepherding God's flock. In verse 20, although Paul is speaking of his own work, he is making himself an example to the elders in their calling to feed the flock of God. They must do as he did, bringing the Word from house to house as part of their oversight of the church and as those who feed the flock.

In John 21:15, a passage which supports the practice of catechizing the children of the church, that work also is described as "feeding God's lambs." Even the preaching of the Word is really pastoral work according to John 10:27 in that it involves the people of God as sheep of Christ.

This is not to deny that there is a special sense in which we speak of pastoral work, i.e., the special care which the ministers, elders, and deacons show for individual members of the church or for families who have special needs or problems. Ezekiel 34:15 and Isaiah 40:11 speak of pastoral work in that special sense. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that all the work of the officebearers is pastoral work, otherwise the different parts of the work will be divorced from each other, and from the preaching of the Word which is at the center of it all.

For the preacher of the Gospel this is very important. It is a reminder that his work of preaching is also pastoral work, and that his calling to be a pastor is first of all the calling to preach the Word. Ministers are sometimes separated into two groups, those who are "good preachers" and those who are "good pastors," the members of the church preferring, so they say, one or the other, and approving or disapproving of the minister's work accordingly. This is altogether wrong. A minister who preaches the Word faithfully is already a good pastor,

and is fulfilling the most important part of his calling to be a pastor.

This is not to deny that personal, individual contact and visiting the sheep is important. It is. A pastor must know his sheep. Even the Great Shepherd says, "I know my sheep and am known of mine" (Jn. 10:14). But a minister will not, cannot be a good pastor if he is not first of all and foremost a good preacher. If a church, then, wants a minister who is a good pastor, she must pray that he be a good, diligent preacher.

There are several reasons why this is true. The most important reason is that through the preaching of the Word the sheep hear Christ (Jn. 10:27; Rom. 10:13-15, 17). He is the great Shepherd and He is the one the sheep need to hear — must hear! Everything the officebearers do is useless if the sheep do not hear and know Christ through their work. But from a practical viewpoint this is also important because good preaching makes much other work unnecessary. It is simply true, especially now, that many members of the church have such great needs and suffer so greatly spiritually because they are not shepherded by the preaching of the Gospel as they should be.

This close connection between all other pastoral work and the preaching of the Gospel is a reminder to all who are involved in the work, elders and deacons as well as ministers, that their calling is to bring the Word of God to God's people. Pastoral visits are not social calls. Having coffee with the elderly, and sitting in the waiting rooms of hospitals with those who have a family member "under the knife" is not pastoral work. There is nothing wrong with doing those things, but that is not the work of shepherding God's sheep, nor does it require the presence of an ordained officebearer. The danger is that the people begin to expect it, especially those who are lonely, and the minister or elder then wastes a great deal of precious time that is needed for other things. W.G.T. Shedd warns of this and other dangers in his book, *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*.

Much time is wasted by the pastor, in merely secular, social intercourse, even when going the rounds of his parish. Ostensibly, he is about the business of his profession, the care of souls; but really he is merely acting the part of a courteous and polite gentleman. Even if he gives the subject of religion some attention, it is only at the close of the interview, after secular topics have been discussed. It may be, that he shrinks from a direct address to an individual, upon the concerns of his soul, and therefore, as he thinks, prepares the way, that he may broach the difficult subject indirectly. He enters into a general and miscellaneous conversation, and if he comes to the subject of religion at all, it is only late, and after the energy and briskness of the conversation have flagged.

The third point, and perhaps the most important of all, is that the flock in which ministers, elders, and deacons are called to be shepherds, is God's flock. Acts 20:28 and I Peter 5:2 both remind us of this. The flock does not exist for the benefit of the officebearers, but the officebearers are called by God to serve His sheep. In fact, when the whole flock is finally gathered into the heavenly fold, then those officebearers will no longer even be needed, for the sheep will be under the direct care of the chief Shepherd. This needs a great deal of emphasis today, not only because many use their positions as "shepherds" to shear the sheep rather than to feed them, but also because many seek office in the church who are not qualified or allowed to do so. In seeking office, they give no thought to the sheep, but only to themselves. In any case, a pastor and shepherd, whoever he be, had better remember that the sheep are God's. God will count them, inspect them, check their spiritual health, and look to see that they have been well fed, when He finally gathers them into His heavenly fold, and those who have shepherded them must be ready to account for everything they have fed the sheep, everywhere they have led them, and whatever they have done to them. The cost



of their ill-health, their lack of nourishment, their weakness will be required at the hands of the shepherds!

That the flock is God's flock is also a reason, therefore, why the officebearers of the church must first of all take heed to themselves, as Paul

says in Acts 20:28. They must take heed that they honor and love the great Shepherd of the sheep, and that they serve as pastors and shepherds for His sake and glory. They must love and care for the sheep with Him in mind, thinking of how He loved the

sheep sufficiently to purchase them at the price of His own costly blood. They must remember the words of Jesus to Peter in John 21:15-17, "If you love Me, be a shepherd to my sheep." □

## Has the Emphasis on Pastoral Counseling Gone Too Far?

*Rev. Ronald Cammenga*

Has the emphasis on pastoral counseling gone too far? Has the emphasis on pastoral counseling gone too far in our churches and among our ministers? My answer to that question is that I firmly believe that it has. I firmly believe that we have been so influenced by the "counseling revolution" that pastoral counseling has lost its proper but limited place in the work of many of our ministers. I am personally convinced that, for many of us, the work of pastoral counseling has begun to take up space and time far out of proportion to that which is proper.

### **Pastoral Counseling a Necessary Aspect of the Gospel Ministry**

Lest I be misunderstood, I do not deny that personal counseling belongs to the calling and work of every pastor. I am firmly convinced that this is so.

The Scriptures require this of the pastor. The pastor is a shepherd. A shepherd is one who provides full and complete care for his sheep, so that under the care of the shepherd, the sheep do not lack (Ps. 23:1). This will certainly require that the shepherd attend to the personal needs of

the sheep. It will not be sufficient that he care for the flock as a whole, but disregard individual needs. In his care for the flock collectively, he must pay attention to the sheep individually. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Great and Good Shepherd, sets the example. Of Him the prophet says in Isaiah 40:11, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young." Speaking of Himself in the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus asks the rhetorical question, "What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?"

In His own earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus ministered to the personal needs of God's people. He met with Nicodemus at night. He ate in the home of Zaccheus. He healed the impotent man at the Pool of Bethesda and later searched him out in the temple and said to him, "Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee" (John 5:14).

The apostle Paul, summarizing his ministry in Ephesus, declares, "I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). The Apostle's work in Ephesus was not

confined to his public ministry. But it belonged to his work in Ephesus that he labored "from house to house." In other words, he did not only preach, but he engaged in pastoral counseling.

Any minister who neglects this important aspect of the ministry is unfaithful to his calling. Any minister who, because the work of pastoral counseling is personally distasteful, draws back from doing it, sins against Christ who calls him to minister to the one sheep that is in need. Any minister who remains aloof and detached



*Rev. Ronald Cammenga*

*Rev. Cammenga is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Loveland, Colorado.*



from the members of the congregation, harms his own ministry. Any minister who is not accessible to the members of his congregation is responsible for the damage that his inaccessibility causes.

Commenting on Acts 20:20, Calvin writes:

This is the second point, that he taught, not only all in the assembly, but individuals in their homes, as each man's need demanded. For Christ did not ordain pastors on the principle that they only teach the Church in a general way on the public platform, but that they also care for the individual sheep, bring back the wandering and scattered to the fold, bind up those broken and crippled, heal the sick, support the frail and weak (Ezek. 34:2, 4); for general teaching will often have a cold reception, unless it is helped by advice given in private.

J.J. VanOosterzee warns, "Even the most excellent Homilete runs the risk of making but a fleeting impression by his word, if he stands in no pastoral relation whatever to his hearers" (*Practical Theology*, p. 511). That is a warning every minister does well to take to heart. To be an effective preacher, a minister must be a caring pastor. He must labor with the depressed, those struggling with marital problems, those wrestling with doubts concerning the assurance of salvation. He must seek the wandering, counsel the wayward teenager, work with that member fighting against the sin of drunkenness, or immorality, or worldliness. He must visit the aged, the shut-ins, the widows and widowers in their loneliness.

But granted that pastoral counseling is a necessary aspect of the gospel ministry, is it possible that it begins to assume too large a place in one's ministry? Can too much emphasis be placed upon pastoral counseling? Can too much time, time that ought to be spent on other things, be taken up in pastoral counseling? The answer to these questions is, "Yes."

The following remarks by Jay Adams, himself in the forefront of the

counseling revolution, ought to be taken to heart by every pastor:

It is plain that house calling either can become a blessing or a burden to the pastor. Unless he learns to say "no" to the incessant thoughtless requests of some members to make unnecessary house calls, and unless he develops the biblical view of visitation that puts house calling in its proper but limited place, the pastor will, like many before him, carry about the unnecessary and crushing load of the guilt of the unmade call (*Shepherding God's Flock*, p. 90).

### **Evidence that the Emphasis on Pastoral Counseling Has Gone Too Far**

There is evidence that the emphasis on pastoral counseling has gone too far among our ministers. Permit me to submit that evidence.

First, there is the inordinate amount of time spent each week by some ministers in pastoral counseling. There are ministers who spend hours every week in calling on members or counseling them in the study. For some, more than one appointment a night, besides morning or afternoon sessions where this is possible, are necessary. More time is spent on personal counseling than on any other single aspect of the ministry. Many other things have to be let go because of the demands of counseling. Pastors, do you find yourself in this situation?

A second indication that the emphasis on pastoral counseling has gone too far is that ministers begin to suffer from "burnout." They are simply run ragged, driven by the demands of the work to sheer exhaustion. Largely this is due to the demands of pastoral counseling. All the time spent, all the meetings to keep, all the problems of those whom he is counseling churning in his own soul, drive the minister to the edge. Pastors, does this describe you?

Yet another indication that the emphasis on pastoral counseling has gone too far is that the minister's own home life begins to suffer. Because he is deeply involved in pastoral coun-

seling he simply does not have sufficient time to spend with his wife and children. I have heard the complaints of ministers' wives, the complaint that they feel like widows. This is a serious matter. This threatens one of the most important callings of the minister, namely, that he be an example in his marriage and home life to the rest of the congregation. A minister who allows himself to become so deeply involved in counseling that he neglects his family, in the end does more harm than good in the congregation. Pastors, are your pastoral labors having an adverse effect on your family life?

Worst of all, the indication that the emphasis on pastoral counseling has gone too far is that ministers are lacking sufficient time to prepare their sermons. I am not referring to exceptional weeks, when several serious situations arise that require the pastor's immediate attention. I am referring to a prevailing situation, that week after week the minister must make last-minute and hurried preparation of his sermons because so much of his time has been consumed in pastoral counseling. Pastors, in all honesty, are the demands of your pastoral labors consistently taking away from time for sermon preparation?

I believe it is at this point that the devil gains the upper hand in our





ministry. If he is able to inundate us with counseling situations, and we are able to excuse our lack of sermon preparation by appealing to the need to be involved in counseling, the devil will have taken a significant step towards removing the Word of God from the church. And this, of course, is what he has aimed at all along. But in this case we ministers are his unwitting allies. The irony of it all!

For a minister to become so involved in counseling that he allows his sermon preparation to suffer is self-defeating. He will find, as many a minister has found, that he simply compounds his problems. The less time he spends in sermon preparation, the more need there is for personal counseling. Ministers who allow themselves to be taken away from necessary sermon preparation because of pastoral counseling are only inviting more hours of counseling. We ministers need to realize that good, well-prepared sermons are the spiritual preventative to many personal problems on the part of the members of the congregation. Many problems can be solved from the pulpit before they become so serious that the pastor needs to be involved.

### Keeping Pastoral Counseling in its Proper Place

Pastoral counseling must be kept in its proper place. It is primarily the minister's responsibility to see to it that his counseling does not begin to occupy an inordinate amount of his time. Elders ought to pay attention to this as well. If it becomes plain that the minister is simply overwhelmed with pastoral work, especially if it becomes obvious that time spent in pastoral counseling is taking away from needed time in sermon preparation, the elders must intervene. The elders must intervene for the good of both minister and congregation.

How can we keep pastoral counseling in its proper place? The following are some suggestions.

First, pastoral counseling can only be kept in its proper place if the minister himself is thoroughly persuaded of the preeminent importance

of preaching. Every minister must be convinced that this is his main calling — to preach the gospel. His main calling is not pastoral counseling. He may not let pastoral counseling, any more than any other legitimate aspect of the ministry, usurp the unique place of preaching (cf. I Cor. 1:17). First and foremost he has been called by Christ to preach the gospel. Let the word of Paul to Timothy, which is the word of Christ to every pastor, make a fresh impression on us: "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word!" (II Tim. 4:1, 2).

Convinced of the importance of the preaching in our ministry, let us resolve to take the time to make good sermons. Let us allow nothing to get in the way of time needed in sermon preparation, not even pastoral counseling. Making good sermons requires study: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15). Making good sermons requires prayer: "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Prayer and study, these are the things that ought to occupy the vast majority of the minister's time each week. Once again, Jay Adams: "By far the amount of time spent in study, and in particular in the study of the Word, ought to outstrip the time devoted to anything else," (*Shepherding God's Flock*, p. 27). If necessary, the minister ought to draw up a schedule that allocates necessary time for study and stick to the schedule rigidly.

Second, pastoral counseling can be kept in its proper place if the minister does what he can to discourage unnecessary calls. The minister must make very clear to God's people that he is there to help them with their serious problems. No question about it. But he must also make clear to them that he is not there for unnecessary calls, for lighthearted chitchat, for friendly conversation whenever a member is in the mood for dropping

in unexpectedly for a visit. Adams has this to say: "When he knows how his time is allotted, the pastor will become invulnerable to inconsiderate and unthinking members of his congregation who otherwise will waste hours of time for him in numerous ways" (*Shepherding God's Flock*, p. 47). J.J. VanOosterzee writes: "Certainly there is, even towards this Church, a servilism which renders the minister, without character of his own, the obedient servant of one or another tone-giver among believers; shame upon every shepherd who lowers himself to be the follower of this or that bell-wether of the flock" (*Practical Theology*, p. 511).

The pastor will also be aided in keeping his pastoral counseling in its proper place by being careful with respect to the purpose of his counseling. Much counseling, as it seems to me, suffers on this score. The purpose of our counseling must not be to get God's people through the present crisis, then to deal with the whole situation all over again down the road a bit when once more matters are of crisis proportions. Rather, in our counseling of God's people, we must aim to equip them to deal with their problems in the future. That has to be our focus. That means, first, that we do not continue to counsel them indefinitely, so that they become dependent on us, in need of their counseling session to make it through the week. But so soon as we can, we cut them loose, by the power of God's grace and the direction of His Word to live the Christian life to which they are called. And second, before cutting them loose, we work at it so that they are able themselves to deal with the same sorts of problems in the future, making it unnecessary for them to seek the help of the pastor.

Take for example the counseling of those with marital problems. The pastor must make husband and wife work through their problems together. He must not allow them to "dump" their problems on him for a quick and easy solution. The pastor must get the couple to see clearly the cause of their problems and teach them to work



together to resolve their problems. He must teach them that, in the future, they must learn to work through their difficulties before they reach a crisis situation.

The same is true of the minister's work with those who are depressed. He must work with individuals to get them to see the causes of their depression, the contributing factors, and the solutions to their depressed state of mind. The pastor's goal must be to equip the individual to handle future bouts with depression on his own.

Finally, the minister must learn to rely more upon other officebearers, his fellow elders especially, for help in pastoral counseling. The thinking has gained too much acceptance in our own churches that the minister is alone qualified to deal with pastoral situations; he is the "trained professional." This is far from the truth. The elders ought to assist the minister in counseling, thus relieving him for necessary time in sermon preparation. Not only is this their calling (James 5:14ff.), but God Himself qualifies the elders for this task.

In the Old Testament, when the work of leading God's people became too great a burden, God ordained the seventy elders to assist Moses (Num. 11). In the New Testament, when the care of God's people became too much for the apostles, God instituted the office of deacon (Acts 6). Adams comments on the Acts 6 passage as follows:

When the apostles recognized that other matters crowding in had begun to hamper them so that they did not have the time to pray as well as to engage in other essential aspects of the work to which God had called them, they took the matter into hand and *made time for prayer*. They assigned unessential matters to another group (deacons), whose office was created for this very purpose. They declared: "We will devote ourselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer" (Acts 6:4). The point of this passage is twofold: 1) Other matters must never be allowed to supersede the essentials. 2) To find time for the essentials, unessential aspects of the

work must be delegated to others. Apart from a strict adherence to these two vital principles, every minister soon will discover that not only his prayer life, but also his ministry as a whole will begin to slide downhill (*Shepherding God's Flock*, p. 25).

In fact, Adams goes so far as to enjoin ministers to enlist the aid not just of officebearers, but other qualified members of the congregation to assist him in pastoral work.

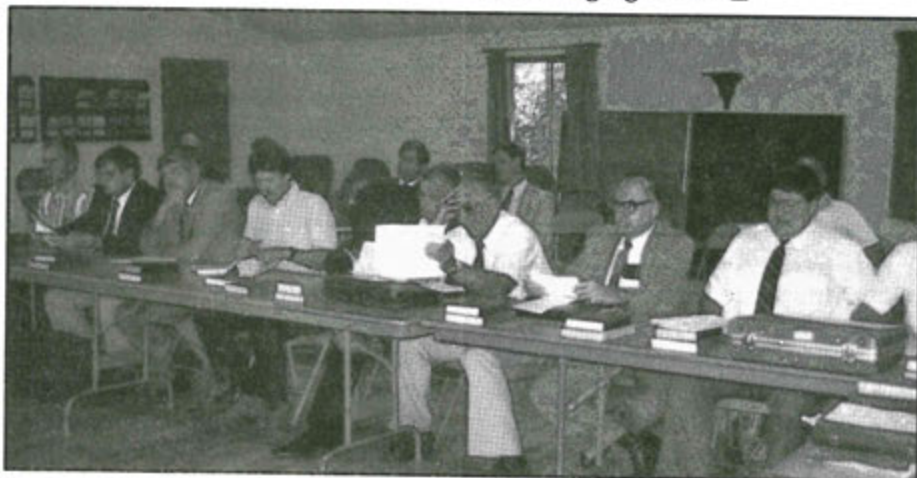
Yet many aspects of calling visitation as they are now carried on by pastors could be conducted by elders, deacons, and others within the congregation — to the great benefit of all involved. It is just simply a fact that if the pastor does not mobilize the *entire* congregation for the work that all can (and ought to) do, it will not be done, what is done will be partial and spotty, and the pastor soon will find himself carrying about the load of guilt of the unmade call.... To meet specialized problems, such as severe illnesses and those occasioned by sin in which experience and ability for counseling are needed, the eldership in general and the pastor in particular must be available and willing to make every house or hospital call required by the situation. But if the pastor wastes his time doing what other members of the congregation could do as readily or even better than he, he robs everyone of blessing (*Shepherding God's Flock*, p. 112).

Finally, the minister will guard against a one-sided emphasis on counseling in his ministry if he follows the general rule of going on a call only

when he is requested. Calvin, when ministering in Geneva, insisted upon this principle, in accordance with the instruction of James 5:14, "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church." Adams remarks:

There are some good reasons for adopting a stricter adherence to this principle than has been characteristic of the pastor in recent times. First, the principle is biblical. However, while the pastor is *required* to go only if requested to do so, the biblical principle does not *forbid* his paying calls upon sick members when his presence is not requested. In going *only* upon request, Calvin possibly went too far. Especially would this sort of rigidity be erroneous now. For in these days when Christians are so poorly instructed, the pastor must at times go even when not asked. Yet (and this is crucial), he should teach, through preaching, bulletin announcements, etc., that it is as much the duty of every sick member (or his family) to call for a pastoral visit as it is to request the services of the physician. People do not expect the physician to take the initiative; why should they expect the pastor? (*Shepherding God's Flock*, p. 114).

Pastoral counseling has a legitimate and necessary place in the calling of every minister of the gospel. But its place must be rightly understood by minister and church members alike. There must not be an overemphasis on pastoral counseling, to the detriment of both minister and congregation. □





# Dealing with the Depressed

Rev. Carl Haak

*Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.*

Psalm 42:11

Spiritual depression is an involved and complex condition. In dealing with the depressed we must be prepared for great anguish and heartache in the work, as well as for the richest blessings when God grants uplifting to the troubled soul. Here we weep with those who weep, call upon God out of the depths, feel all our inadequacies, and cry out for light. Working with the depressed requires much spiritual strength and wisdom and can leave the pastor/elder weary if he is not consciously trusting in the Lord and hoping in Him (Jer. 17:7).

Spiritual depression is a common ailment of the soul. The frequency with which Scripture (especially the Psalms) deals with this subject brings one to the conclusion that it is a very common condition in the lives of the saints. Almost no saint whose life is depicted in the Scriptures was without times of depression. This answers one of the great questions of the depressed: "How can I be a child of God if I feel this way?" The presence of depression does not mean one is not in a state of grace and adoption. It does mean that my life is not consistent with what God has made me to be, and thus it is something I must seek the grace of God to overcome and change. Depression keeps us from living to the praise of His grace, and therefore is

something from which I must repent (I Pet. 2:9).

Spiritual depression is not a malady before which we stand defenseless and helpless, simply waiting for the time when the storm clouds will pass and the sun will return. The child of God can do something about it. Depression brings us to see our helplessness (and a whole lot of other things about ourselves too). However, God shows these things not to crush us, but to reveal to us the all-sufficiency of the great Physician, who has carried our sorrows, and in whose wings there is healing. He instructs us as to where we have gone wrong in our thoughts and failed in our duties. He gives us, through His Word, the grace to change. As great as depression is, and we must not minimize its depths if we are to deal effectively against it, the grace of Christ is far greater. Also concerning this seemingly impenetrable spiritual darkness we labor in the confidence that God's child "can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13).

## What is Depression?

By spiritual depression we mean more than what is meant by the popular use of the term. Commonly when we say, "I'm depressed," we mean, "I am feeling low, down, blue, discouraged." Spiritual depression is more than that. It is when the low spirit affects our life in substantive ways, when we are down and out, when the low feelings take over and drag us even deeper. It is not just feeling bad about one's self and one's circumstances, it is being overwhelmed and governed by those feelings.

Depression is a feeling of guilt and unworthiness. It is a debilitating mood. In depression the conscience becomes overly active and introspective while the body itself slows down and operates at a lower level. In

depression we become absorbed in thoughts like, "What good am I? What's the use anyway? I just can't, I can't go on, I can't take it, it's too much."

The psalmist in the 42nd Psalm gives an extraordinarily accurate picture of depression. Two figures are used: 1) *Downcast* — As a man bowed down under the weight of some heavy object, so the depressed soul feels itself under a crushing weight from which it cannot escape and which it cannot bear. 2) *Disquieted* — As the sea is tossed by the storm and not at ease, so the depressed heart is plunged into the depths of woe and feels itself unable to attain peace. The psalmist also speaks of the outward symptoms of depression. He looks troubled, haggard, dejected, vexed. He weeps day and night. It has affected his appetite. He is worried about himself and what is happening to him. Everything seems to be on top of him and he is drowning in a sea of woe.

The Scriptures impress on us the depth of this despair. We have already seen that it can affect us physically to the point of sickness, ulcers, weight loss, obesity, loss of memory, etc. (For this see Ps. 77:2-4; 102:3-5; 88.) It can lead to a total breakdown, in which we cease to function at all (see Jer. 20:7-9). And still more, in depression the sense of God's presence is lost. In the throes of depression we can conclude that God does not answer our prayers or take pity. We become angry with Him and feel ourselves cut off from His presence forever (see Ps. 13; 77:1-10).

Thus spiritual depression is an interruption of the experience of the peace of God in the soul, a loss of the assurance of God's favor, a surrender to the monster of self-pity, an introspection which is not guided by faith in Christ but by our own pride.

Rev. Haak is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Lynden, Washington.





Rev. Carl Haak

### What is the Cause of Depression?

The causes can be many. Anything which tends to get us down a bit can be the initial cause of depression. It can be a change of job, working too much, resentment or bitterness towards someone or something that has happened, marital strife, the waywardness of our child, a disappointment, our looks and abilities, etc. These and more can be the occasion from which depression arises. Or it can be when we know we are guilty to begin with; that is, it can come out of a known and willful sin and transgression of God's will.

However, depression is due to the response one gives to the difficulty, change, disappointment, or sin that has come into one's life. When we fail to respond biblically, and fail to have all our thinking and acting regarding the thing that has come into our lives or the thought that has risen in our minds controlled by the Scriptures, then depression strikes. Depression arises when we are governed by and give in to our own feelings regarding these upsetting things, rather than being ruled in our *thinking, willing, and acting* by the Scriptures.

Depression can spiral. We can fail to handle a responsibility biblically. We walk in a sin impenitently and without making amends as far as we can. We fail to deal with a setback as God would have us deal with it. We look at ourselves and think of

ourselves according to the standards we have devised. As a result we feel bad. Then, instead of following our obligations before God and dealing with that responsibility, sin, or lack of self-esteem as God would have us to do, we follow our feelings on these things. We find ourselves seeking pity. And the end is that we feel worse and worse about ourselves, our circumstances, and our obligations.

We must remember that we are frail and weak saints of God who need at every turn of the way and moment of the day to have our innermost thoughts governed by the Word of the Lord. So easily we slip into viewing life's situations and ourselves from our own vision, rather than through the cross of Christ crucified. When we do this, and then leave ourselves stand for a moment before the gaping hole of our own feelings, our steps well nigh slip and we conclude: "for all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning" (Ps. 73).

The question is asked whether depression can have physical causes. It would be a denial of Scripture to rule that out. Scripture teaches that God has made us one, yet soul and body, and thus there is an inseparable relationship between the physical life and the spiritual. This is powerfully illustrated in the life of our Lord. We read that the devil came to tempt Jesus after He had been in the wilderness forty days and nights fasting, and therefore in a weakened physical state. He, the devil, chose this moment because he was and remains a careful student of human nature, playing every contributing factor in our makeup for his advantage. Because of the close relation between soul and body, we may not dismiss physical factors which either can enter in or lie at the root of depression. A complete physical examination, as well as the use of drugs which supply the body what it normally produces and is not producing, can be helpful in the treatment of depression.

Nevertheless, to place depression in the category of physical illness

would be a mistake. Then, as with a toothache, so also when my soul is in the depths and I find fear and guilt on every side, I should take myself to a medical doctor for the cure. Then I need perhaps an injection, but I do not need the present power of Christ's grace delivering me from the bondage of my sinful self. To make depression primarily a physical ailment is to negate the need for the real delivering mercies of God working in the heart and soul. Besides, even the aspects of depression which are physically related only underscore and make vivid the problems which are present in the life of the particular saint suffering depression. Depression has to do with sin. Ultimately it has to do with unbelief, the greatest sin against which we struggle. It is the failure to trust in God, even though He slay me. As hard as that is for me to hear, hear it I must, for then, and only then, can I rejoice in the power of Christ Jesus who came to save sinners also from the pit of depression.

### How Should We Deal With the Depressed?

First of all, we must handle the Word of God skillfully, compassionately, and believably.

I trust we need not work to establish the case among us that the Word of God is the powerful tool for treating depression. Depression can and does lead God's saints to be unable to read the Bible and even to become angry at the Bible itself. For a time they cannot use it right. Or they can be using it but not applying it. Therefore, I want to stress the modifiers above: skillfully, compassionately, and believably. To bring this out, we should be aware of two dangers in this regard.

The first danger is that of compassion without actually bringing the Word of God. Now compassion is essential for the work of the pastor/elder as Paul sets that forth in Acts 20. But there must be more than mere empathy. If all that is accomplished is that the distressed of soul says, "How understanding and sympathetic you are," but he is not told what the Word



of God says to him in his need, what good is it? The goal of much shepherding today seems to be to establish the reputation of ministers as sympathetic men. If we are to help our people in their need, the Word must be brought, for it is in the Word that we believe Jesus comes with His healing grace. More, we will make matters worse. The child of God has come to us and told us his woe. It is out there as big as ever. If no word from God comes, the preoccupation with the problem has only increased as a result of the talk with the pastor. We must not only talk about the problem, we must talk through the problem to see what God says about it. Even the pastor of pastors, the apostle Paul, did not allow his warm heart for the sheep to keep back the Word of God. He reminds the elders of Ephesus, "I kept back nothing that was profitable for you...."

The second danger is to use the Word of God as some kind of magic wand. This is to use Scripture simplistically, to read a few texts and explain them in a general sort of way and then send the person off reciting a favorite passage. We must be faithful and honest with the Scriptures, using them skillfully — that is, practically, substantively, concretely, pointedly. The Scriptures must be brought to bear on the specifics of the depression the person is enduring.

Secondly we must work with the depressed in the framework of the truths of justification and the adequacy of God.

Justification is the truth which,

when it rests in the heart, must soothe the troubled soul. Justification humbles pride by teaching that my acceptance with God cannot be based on myself, even if I were as good as my pride would want me to be. Justification proclaims to the soul in the depths that there is no condemnation to it. Justification is the truth which supplies the motivation for sanctification and thus the reason why I as a despairing saint ought not despair and can do what I find so impossible to do. It was the knowledge that God had cast all his sins behind His back that delivered Hezekiah from the pit. The sins and failures he saw and could not hide from his view had been hid by God. This knowledge got him up again to praise God and busy himself with teaching his children (Is. 38).

The adequacy of God is the answer to every conceivable feeling of inadequacy in ourselves. "Hope thou in God!" was the counsel David gave to his downcast and disquieted soul. We labor in the conviction that in knowing God in His being there is a balm for every wound, correction for every thought, strength for every duty. God delights in having His people know Him in the full array of his virtues (Ex. 34:5-7). He is Jehovah, and, therefore, though we are so weak and sorrow is so strong, He abides stronger. To the fear which the depressed have that he will not help me, He proclaims His name as merciful, gracious, and longsuffering. In dealing with depression we must never doubt the adequacy of our God.

And thirdly, we must take de-

pression seriously, watching for the warning signs, and spending the needed time and energy in counseling which depression requires.

Our eyes should be sensitive to the beginning of depression in the lives of the saints. Some of the indications of depression are: withdrawal from family and friends; loss of interest or satisfaction in one's calling; a feeling of isolation and loneliness; slowed thinking; feeling a burden; feeling helpless and without hope; problems on the job or in the family; sleep difficulty and weight loss; irritability; talk about dying; prolonged grief.

Depression should be something we address in the preaching, frequently in fact, as the struggle against depression is in one form or another common in the lives of God's people, and will be so as long as they are in the body of this death.

We should be prepared to spend the time that is needed and deal as thoroughly as we can with the cases of depression that come to our attention. Seldom is one visit to the pastor or elder going to alter a pattern of depression in the life of a child of God. It does not work that way. "This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting" (Mk. 9:29).

As difficult as this work can be, we engage in it, as with all our work, in the undefeatable confidence that "The Lord redeemeth the soul of his servants: and none of them that trust in him shall be desolate" (Ps. 34:22). □

## Does Psychiatry Have a Place in the Pastoral Ministry?

*Rev. Russell Dykstra*

The question posed by the title of this article is not academic. It is faced by every pastor who counsels depressed, troubled, hurting members of his flock. A little reading reveals a variety of views on the mat-

ter. A few writers almost entirely rule out the use of psychiatrists by Christians. On the other end of the spectrum are pastors who seem more interested in "preaching" the psychology of the world than they are in

*Rev. Dykstra is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Doon, Iowa.*



bringing God's Word to their flocks. In practice, many other pastors are quick to steer their troubled members to "the professionals." When I thought about whether or not psychiatry is necessary for the church today, the question arose in my mind, "What did troubled believers do for thousands of years without psychiatrists?" That led me to conclude that psychiatry is not *essential* for helping mentally distressed church members, for believers somehow managed to struggle along without this help in the first 6,000 years of the church's history. Given then, that psychiatry is not absolutely necessary, *can* psychiatrists be of some assistance? My reading led me to answer that question affirmatively. Thus my answer to the question in the title is a qualified "Yes" — psychiatry can be used as a tool by the Reformed pastor in his ministry.

Before examining the topic, two terminology notes are in order. First, the title deliberately speaks of "psychiatry," not "psychology." The difference between men in these two fields is that the psychiatrist is a medical doctor who deals with mental problems, having also the right and (one hopes) the ability to practice medicine for physical ailments. A psychologist, on the other hand, is not a medical doctor. Even if he has earned a PhD in psychology, and is called "doctor," he may not practice medicine. This article is concerned mostly with psychiatry, though much overlapping exists. Where the difference is important in the discussion, it will be pointed out.

Secondly, mental troubles are a difficult mix of physical, emotional, and spiritual problems. For that reason, we ought not to call them a sickness. This article will not use terms which in any way suggest it to be an illness [even words like cure, recovery, etc.]. Rather the words "restore" and "restoration" are used. One can be restored to good physical and mental health, but also a sinner is restored by repentance. The amount of restoration necessary in each area will vary in every case.

## The Arguments for Ruling Out Psychiatrists

The arguments against using psychiatrists are of two kinds. First, there are raised against psychiatry itself objections which maintain that psychiatry is harmful. Secondly, arguments can be made that psychiatry is not to be used because it is unnecessary — a better [for some, the only] way exists for treatment of depression and other mental/spiritual troubles, namely, the care of a pastor.

We turn first to some of the objections against psychiatry itself. One mark against psychiatry is simply that it is not very effective. Over the years a number of studies have been done which demonstrate that neurotics not treated are as likely to get over their troubles as those receiving treatment. The same is true for disturbed children. One could also add that, years ago already, psychiatrists claimed they held the key to solving the problems of society; but in the United States, where there are more psychiatrists per capita than in any other nation on earth, society's problems have only gotten worse.

Secondly, worldly psychiatry is antithetical to Scripture in every aspect. It is so with respect to its presuppositions, for the unbelieving psychiatrist maintains that there is no God and that man has no soul (in the biblical sense). He views man as an animal whose being has been determined by evolutionary processes. Also, he considers man to be basically good, and denies the existence of sin.

In that same line, the methods of unbelieving psychiatry are, at best, suspect. Its methods include psychotherapy [excavations of the sub-conscious], getting in touch with your true self, behavior modification [as one might train dogs], reality therapy, self-actualization, and more. A study of these methods reveals that, for the most part, they are foolish or just plain sinful.

In addition, the goals of worldly psychiatrists are markedly different from Scripture's goals for the Christian. Their goals include such things as mere earthly happiness, serving

self, *not* God, and getting a good self-concept, raising one's self-esteem.

Such treatment generally turns out self-centered fools, or patients in mental institutions who are worse off than when they began their treatment. A serious study of worldly psychiatry does indicate, therefore, that it is antithetical to Christian beliefs and practices.



Rev. Russell Dykstra

A third objection to the use of a psychiatrist is that he often uses drugs in his treatment. Ethical questions arise over the use of drugs. May problems which involve not only the mind, but also spiritual problems of sin, be treated with drugs? Everyone ought to realize that sin *cannot* be resolved, removed, using drugs. At the same time, one wonders whether such drugs really restore, or just give the illusion that they do? Are they like alcohol — just getting a man's mind off his problems for a while?

Another problem with the use of drugs is that they can be addictive, and still the original problem may not be solved. Then a more serious evil exists, and more sins are committed because of the dependence upon the drugs.

In addition to those objections against psychiatry, it is also maintained that psychiatry is unnecessary. If help is necessary, the care of a pastor is the only way to restoration. A number of reasons for this can be



given. First, since mental problems are almost always inseparably connected with spiritual problems, they require spiritual counseling from the Scriptures. The pastor is then the one to consult. Also, the Word of God is sufficient to resolve the troubles. It is also true that the Holy Spirit operates without psychiatrists. The Spirit works only through the Word. And, finally, the believer already has far greater resources in Christ. He has the Spirit, all the blessing of salvation, and an unfailing supply of God's grace. These, not the psychiatrist, will restore the troubled saint.

Can these criticisms be answered? The first two objections [psychiatry is 1) largely ineffective and 2) antithetical to Christianity] are true for a worldly psychiatrist; however, with a good, Christian psychiatrist, these arguments carry much less, if any weight. What is a Christian psychiatrist? He is, first, a Christian—he confesses Christ to be his Savior. But he is more, because some who call themselves Christian psychiatrists deal with troubled people in about the same manner that worldly psychiatrists do. But he ought, at the least, to believe what the Bible teaches about sin, the need for repentance, and the hope of forgiveness in the cross; about the soul of man and his depraved nature; and about the sovereign God who hates sin and whose fellowship is experienced only when man walks in obedience. These beliefs may not be merely academic, but must be the basis of his work. He must follow the biblical pattern for dealing with troubled souls. If he does, then his work will not be antithetical to Christianity, nor will it be ineffective. We recognize the difficulty often times of finding a psychiatrist that has a Reformed view of God and man; but the closer a psychiatrist is to the Scriptures in his belief and practice, the more effective he will be in working with the believer.

As noted, objections are raised against using drugs to restore the troubled soul. All Christians should recognize the impossibility of restoring a sinner, or even removing the

troubles of a Christian, through drugs. No responsible Christian psychiatrist claims that drugs will restore anyway. The use of drugs depends much on the kind of problem and the approach of the psychiatrist. Again, with a responsible Christian psychiatrist, this problem is much less significant. This will be discussed further below.

Finally, all the reasons why a troubled Christian cannot hope for restoration without spiritual counseling are true, and are reasons why the pastor is effective in the great majority of his work. Nevertheless, they do not answer the question, "Can or may psychiatry be used effectively in some instances?" To that question we turn next.

### The Expedient Use of Psychiatrists

Is the use of psychiatry permitted? Certainly the Bible permits us to approach a fellow Christian for advice and help with spiritual, physical, and emotional problems. If the psychiatrist is Christian, and not enslaved to a worldly psychology, it would be allowed by Scripture.

However, if only worldly psychiatrists are available, the question is much more difficult. But notice, first of all, that ungodly men are used to treat physical ailments. Secondly, some areas seem to straddle the fence between the physical and the mental. For example, anti-hallucinatory drugs could be administered equally well by a believing or unbelieving psychiatrist. But an extremely dangerous situation arises when such a man gives *counsel* to the Christian, because he will inevitably touch the spiritual aspect of the problem.

Still we maintain that psychiatrists *can* be used. Why? Simply because of the close connection between the body and the soul [the mental and the physical]. The body and soul are not two separate, independent entities; they are two "parts" of the individual, very much intertwined and interdependent. What affects the body affects the mind. So true is this that some mental problems are actually the result of physi-

cal ailments and/or chemical imbalances in the blood. In such a case, the advantage of going to a psychiatrist over a regular medical doctor is that a psychiatrist is trained to recognize the connections between the physical and the mental, and should grasp the problem more quickly.

Again, because of this close connection between body and soul, depression and other mental problems have effects on the body which sometimes can be treated with drugs. If severe problems are not treated, the restoration will usually be slower and more difficult. As an example, through anti-depressant medicine, a severely depressed individual may be able to relax enough to function and sleep, and thus have the ability to get at the real problems [mental and spiritual] that cause the depression.\*\*

Another reason why a psychiatrist [or psychologist] may be useful is that he is skilled at opening the lines of communication. The Word of God restores; but sometimes the mental state is such that the member cannot [will not?] hear the Word brought by anyone. The soul is troubled. But the mind, the avenue to the soul, is closed. In this instance, a psychiatrist often can bring the individual to the point where he can listen to and talk with his pastor. By no means should the pastor back out of the work, but he

---

\*\* Some psychiatrists make even greater claims in this connection. Drs. Frank Minnerth and Paul Meier (*Introduction to Psychology and Counseling*) insist that the physical effects of many mental problems are more than just the physical symptoms that a person cannot eat or sleep, or that he is tired, etc. They say that the chemical balance is affected in the body of the depressed and that some chemicals necessary in humans are depleted because of the continued depression. Thus the drugs are not merely a "pick-me-up," but are also like a vitamin which gives the depressed person the chemical in which he is deficient. That in turn makes him feel better, and better able to deal with his problems. This idea is rejected by others, however, and this writer is not qualified to judge the truth of the matter.



may need this help to get through to the individual.

If it be granted that there are certain instances where a psychiatrist can be used by the troubled Christian, questions still must be faced as to when and how to use psychiatrists. In general, we believe that the psychiatrist should by all means be Christian in belief and practice. At the same time, the pastor must be involved in the work.

But certainly, not all troubled Christians need a psychiatrist. When should one be sent to a psychiatrist? No absolute rules can be given in this, but some guidelines may be suggested. If the individual: hears voices, experiences hallucinations or delusions; cannot function; cannot hear the counsel of the pastor; seems to be genuinely suicidal or homicidal; has an obvious physical problem causing the emotional difficulties — a psychiatrist should be consulted.

#### A Christian Perspective

Because this article maintains that psychiatrists *can* be used, it may

appear that it is advocating widespread use of the same. That not being the case, we conclude by trying to put it back into the proper perspective.

First, the Christian ought not seek psychiatric help too quickly. Two reasons can be cited for this. First, unless the psychiatrist is a Christian whose practices are very much in harmony with the Bible, his work will not restore completely, and, on the contrary, he will probably lead the troubled saint down wrong paths. A good Christian psychiatrist is hard to find, impossible in many places. Secondly, since pastors are called to this labor, psychiatry ought not be used unless there are good reasons why a pastor cannot handle the problems.

Besides, we must not forget the tremendous resources on hand for the severely distraught believer. First, the Word of God is the most powerful and effective instrument for helping him. Secondly, pastors are called to be shepherds of the flock. They are therefore qualified and commanded by God to perform these pastoral la-

bors. Pastor and flock must remember that weakest means are used by God to bring the Word of God which will restore. Thirdly, the believer has the Spirit of Christ dwelling in him, and an all-sufficient supply of God's grace.

In addition to that, the church as a whole must be used effectively to support as well as counsel the troubled. This includes the elders, who are also pastors of the flock [Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:1-5]. Let not the role of the older women in the congregation be forgotten. It is the particular calling of the older women to help the younger women [Tit. 2:3-5]. Not only that, but in Acts 20:35, Paul makes the support of the weak the calling of every member of the church. And, finally, the members of the congregation who have experienced mental problems must understand that they were given their problems and restored by God in order to help others in the church.

May God use these means first and foremost to sustain and restore each member of His church. □

## The Role of the Elders and Deacons in Pastoral Care

*Robert Brands*

It is in keeping with our theme, "Shepherding God's Flock," that we now consider the involvement of the elders and deacons in the labors of pastoral care. I take it for granted that you are all agreed that the elders and deacons have a definite responsibility in regard to pastoral care. What we must determine is to what extent we are to be involved in this work, and what is the precise character of our work.

*Mr. Brands is an elder in the Protestant Reformed Church of Loveland, Colorado.*

Although our ministers especially have been given the title of pastors, it is also true that the elders and deacons are pastors. The term "pastor" is a title which means "shepherd." In Hebrews 13:20 Jesus is referred to as the great Shepherd of the sheep. In I Peter 5:4 He is called the chief Shepherd, and in John 10:11 Jesus refers to Himself as the good Shepherd who giveth His life for the sheep. This latter chapter provides the highest comfort possible, as it emphatically asserts the safety of the sheep. Indeed, Jesus is the great and good Shepherd who giveth His life for His sheep. He bought them with

His blood. He is the door, and whoso would enter into the heavenly mansions must enter through Him. He holds the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. This threefold office is now divided up into three distinct offices, namely, the minister preaching the Word of the Lord as prophet, the deacon providing for the needs of the church as priest, and the elder exercising the rule over the church as king. These offices cannot be separated from each other but must be kept distinct.

Although each office has its own distinct labor, a labor which does not belong to the other offices, there are



labors which overlap and can be carried out mutually. It is with these labors that we are dealing when we speak of pastoral care. Ministers, elders, and deacons have been called by the great Shepherd to lead His sheep in the green pastures of His Word. They are to exercise extreme care for the sheep because those sheep are very precious in the sight of the Lord. It is absolutely essential that officebearers have a deep and overwhelming love for the sheep, and that they see to it that the sheep with whom they are working can see this in them.

As we labor with the wayward we must be deeply aware of our own sinful nature, acknowledging that in us dwelleth no good thing. There is no room for pride on the part of an officebearer. He must come as a servant of the Lord in all meekness and humility. Jesus taught that lesson to His disciples as He washed their feet. And in Numbers 12 we are informed that the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth.

It is also necessary that we be patient with stubborn sheep. It is impossible to force sheep to go where they do not want to go. Our calling is to lead them, and this we have to do gently. They must follow willingly, being persuaded that this is the best path for them to follow. Since sheep can easily be led astray we have to be certain that we are leading them faithfully to the great Shepherd.

It must be remembered that most of the people are followers and are looking for leadership. The Lord has placed His sheep under our care and has given us the mandate to lead them according to His Word. The Lord has made us to be leaders by giving us the authority to teach His Word to these sheep. We will be held accountable if we fail to carry out this task faithfully. We also have to see to it that the helpless sheep are using the Bible for direction and guidance in their life and that they are turning to it often as a remedy for the manifold problems which they encounter. Since they are spiritually unable to care for

themselves, they are to be instructed to seek the Lord zealously in prayer, since the Lord will grant His grace and Holy Spirit only to those who sincerely and continuously ask this of Him. We also must pray that the Lord will grant this to them, since our labors are in vain if the Lord does not work in the hearts of His sheep by His Holy Spirit.

We now consider some of the specific work of pastoral care, which in large part is carried out by the minister. This is work which is kept confidential and of necessity has to do with stressful situations. It has to do with serious problems which, for one reason or another, cannot be solved by the parties involved. These are problems which fit in the following categories: lack of assurance of salvation, depression, loneliness, dissatisfaction with God's way, discipline problems, marital problems, physical problems, and a number of other problems which can cause much grief. There is no question about it that the elders are in duty bound to be involved in this type of work. Their calling is to comfort and instruct the members. This is so important that the church visitors will ask if these tasks are carried out faithfully by the elders.

You might have reservations concerning this work, and believe that this work should be done only by the minister because he has much more knowledge in this field of labor and has received training to do this particular work. There is an element of truth in that. No doubt this is why members who need help will often call on the minister. It must not be forgotten, however, that the effectiveness of the work lies strictly in the power of the written Word of the Lord, applied to the heart by the working of the Holy Spirit. There is no reason why the elder cannot be prepared to bring that Word. It is incumbent upon him that he study that Word diligently and thereby be equipped to bring it to God's people in all of their distresses, no matter what they may be. He has just as much authority as the minister does



*Mr. Robert Brands*

and can say, "Thus saith the Lord." He has to go forward with confidence in the Lord, believing that, even as the Lord has called him to this high office, He will also qualify him, and will give him the strength to do the work.

I want to emphasize, however, that the Lord does not qualify automatically without any effort on our part, but rather uses means. Just as the Lord does not have any use for a lazy preacher, He also does not have any use for a lazy elder or deacon. We have to be fully dedicated to the work. In addition to making a diligent study of the Word of God, we will find it very beneficial to read good Reformed books and magazines. Although these are not infallible, they are extremely valuable as an aid to understanding the Bible. We live in the communion of saints and can learn from each other.

We also should be well acquainted with the confessions of our church, as they are the expressions of what we believe concerning various points of doctrine of the Bible. Still another means which the Lord uses to qualify His officebearers, and which I want to emphasize, is the use of prayer. The Lord will not grant His grace and Holy Spirit to us if we do not pray fervently for it. We have to pray for wisdom and understanding in doing the work of the Lord properly. An officebearer should never leave his home without first praying that the



Lord will provide for all of his needs in his spiritual labors, and that the Lord will bless the work that he does. You will be surprised at what the Lord will enable you to do when you rely on Him in such a manner. Prayer is also an art which has to be learned and developed as you work with the saints and pray with them.

There is another very compelling reason why elders must be prepared to do this type of pastoral work, namely that they cannot take for granted that the minister will always be available for the work. He might be gone temporarily, or it could be that the congregation is without a minister. Taking this into consideration, we should dismiss any notion that we will never be called into a very difficult pastoral labor.

There is also a broader perspective of this matter of pastoral care by the elders and deacons which we must now consider. It can be said that all of the work which is done by the officebearers has to do with pastoral care of the flock. They are called to watch over the flock in all things, being fully aware of the very powerful threefold enemy, namely the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. This enemy will never cease to assault the sheep as long as they are on this side of the grave. The sheep have to be encouraged to fight this battle, and they must be guided along the pathway which leads to eternal life and glory. They are to be led with a shepherd's rod, namely the Word of God which is also used to protect and correct them. They are to be kept together as a flock, and, therefore, all strife must be removed as soon as it comes up. There is nothing that the devil thrives on more than division in a congregation. This gives him fuel to work with. Put a stop to it right away. Members at serious odds with each other have to be denied the right to come to the Lord's Supper. How wicked it is in the Lord's sight when grudges are harbored, to the extent that one saint will not speak to another. There is nothing more detrimental to being a faithful witness in the world than this matter of strife in

the congregation. It is to be avoided at all costs. The officebearer has to admonish the flock to seek peace with all of their hearts, pointing out that the mark of Christians is that they love even their enemies, as Christ commanded, or they are not different from unbelievers, who love only those who show love to them.

The chief task of the officebearer in pastoral care is to take good heed to the spiritual condition of the flock and to see to it that all of their needs are met. This begins with the little lambs of the flock and ends with the elderly members. I am very thankful for Article 23 of the Church Order, which demands that the families of the congregation be visited. There is no better way to become acquainted with the flock and to learn to know them, than through family visitation. It is through these visits that a determination can be made as to their spiritual condition and as to what their needs are. Avoid questions which require only a yes or no answer. Ask questions which require an explanation on their part. The idea is to get the sheep to open up their hearts and souls to you. In connection with this, I highly recommend a book entitled, *Taking Heed to the Flock*, by P.Y. DeJong, which gives valuable information for the conducting of family visitation.

The elders are also to visit the sick, the aged, and those who are dying. I would like to bring to your attention a rather neglected form in the back of our *Psalter*, entitled "The Consolation of the Sick." This is an excellent form to prepare the sheep to meet their Maker. Be acquainted with it, and use it as the need may require. I would also like to recommend a book entitled, *The Elder's Handbook*, by Berghoef and DeKoster, which I found to be extremely helpful. It is a good idea to prepare ahead of time for various pastoral labors such as death, sickness, or discipline, by selecting appropriate Bible texts, since you never know how much time will be available when the need arises.

Pastoral care also includes the discipline of the youth, as it is often

the young who are guilty of straying from the fold. When working with them, always treat them as redeemed in the blood of Christ, even though you might feel otherwise. It is highly desirable to have a good working relationship with them. Officebearers must evaluate each case separately, while paying attention also to the effect which one member has on the rest of the flock. Discipline has to be carried out with dispatch if a member is influencing other members with his life style.

We also have to look at worship as pastoral care. It is through the worship services that the gospel is preached and the sheep are fed. The elders are to see to it that the minister preaches Jesus Christ and Him crucified, which is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. The flock has to be edified through the preaching and be blessed by it, having their faith strengthened. God has to be honored, glorified, and worshiped through the sermons. The question is not, first of all, "What's in it for me?" but rather, "Can I worship God through the preaching?" Is His name highly exalted so that I can bow down before Him in holy adoration and reverence? The congregation is to be made aware of their sins and admonished to flee from them. They are to be comforted with the knowledge that deliverance has come through the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. They are to be exhorted to live a life of thankfulness for this great salvation.

The elders should feel free to discuss with the minister the contents of the sermons, what is not being preached and should be, and improvements in the delivery of the sermons. The elders have to make the judgment themselves if the Word is edifying in the preaching and if the minister is proclaiming the Word faithfully — apart from what the people might say about it. It can be that the people are completely satisfied with the preaching, but yet the minister is not pleasing in the Lord's sight. Think of the many false churches who have people satisfied with the preaching



because they are not confronted with their sins.

As for the deacons, they are involved with pastoral care especially by providing for the needs of the poor and distressed. They must reveal themselves as messengers from Christ, comforting the sheep with His word. They are to apply that Word to them in their needs. Sometimes these sheep can become very despondent, being dissatisfied with the ways of the Lord. In that case the deacons have to be more concerned about that spiritual problem than with their financial one. The Lord is sovereign

who makes rich and makes poor. Our trust is to be placed in Him at all times to provide for all of our needs. The deacons are also to give instruction concerning proper stewardship, and they must make sure that these sheep are not lazy, but are working to the best of their ability. The deacons should seek out the poor and not wait for a call from them. When the deacons do this, they are showing genuine love and concern for the sheep.

As we consider all of the pastoral labors which the Lord has given us, we may wish, like the apostle Paul, to have various thorns in the

flesh removed so that we can do the work more effectively. I believe, however, that the Lord's purpose with these thorns is to keep us from sinful pride and to cause us to turn to Him in prayer for all of our needs. He is our help, our strength, and our great Shepherd who leads us. Let us follow Him faithfully and let us lead the sheep to the arms of this merciful Savior. What a blessed work and what a blessed privilege the Lord has given unto us. We should be deeply concerned that we do it right and that we do it heartily as to the Lord. □

## Ministering to the Terminally Ill

Rev. Michael DeVries

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

Psalm 23:4

In a talk given in our Protestant Reformed Seminary several years ago on the subject of "Sick-Visiting," Rev. C. Hanks, a veteran pastor, remarked regarding terminal cases, "You walk with them down the valley. You must stay behind. Sometimes you'll envy them. The grace of God will amaze you." To a student, the truth of those remarks did not really "sink in." But now, having served as minister of the Word and as pastor to the dying for several years, I can say that the truth of those remarks has struck me again and again.

Though our entire earthly life is a walk through that valley, the consciousness of that is most emphatically realized when one is confronted with the reality of terminal illness. It

is then that the valley is the darkest, the most lonely, the most dangerous. Especially then the sheep need Christ their Shepherd. Especially then they need to be able to confess with the Psalmist, "I will fear no evil: for thou art with me!" That means, very simply, that the undershepherds of the Good Shepherd must be there. The officebearers of the church, minister, elders, and deacons must be busy visiting the dying. They come as representatives of Christ in the service of the Good Shepherd.

### The Essentials

We will not belabor what ought to be obvious — that the undershepherd and ambassador of Christ must only and always come with the Word of Christ. The sheep, especially the dying sheep, need to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd! We must be there to *bring the Word!* Our ministering to the terminally ill is not a series of social visits, not a series of medical consultations, not a series of psychiatric sessions. Briefly, pointedly, simply, bring the Word! Usually five to ten verses are enough. In some instances just a verse or two may be sufficient. But bring the Word, a specific passage, and briefly explain

and apply it. We ought not lecture or sermonize, but rather authoritatively, yet with compassion and sensitivity, open and expound the Word for them. Bring the good news of Christ, and Him crucified and risen again!

The other essential in ministering to the terminally ill is *prayer*. Come



Rev. Michael DeVries  
and Mr. Gilbert Griess

Rev. DeVries is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Edgerton, Minnesota.



to the dying with the prayer of faith which saves the sick (James 5:13). *Always pray!* The needs of the dying must be brought to the throne of grace. The dying usually want us to pray, and often *need* us to pray. It can be difficult for them to pray for themselves. In prayer lead the dying in the confession of their sins; lead them to the cross of Christ and forgiveness; lead them to the riches of the salvation we have in Christ; lead them to the grace and mercy of our sympathetic Savior who is there to help in time of need; lead them to the victory we have in Christ even over death and the grave.

### Effectiveness in this Ministry

Bring the Word! Pray! Indeed, these are basic, indispensable in ministering to the terminally ill. Never despair of the Word and prayer — even if the dying saint has lapsed into a coma or has sustained brain damage. God never leaves His saints without the consciousness of His Word. Jesus promises: "My sheep hear my voice."

But it is my conviction that much more is necessary to make that Word and prayer more effective by the grace of God, in the working of His Spirit. Consider the following:

#### 1. Sensitivity

Officebearers ought to realize that the dying saint probably knows he is going to die, whether he has been told or not. We ought to be sensitive to their struggle in that connection. The dying person always has a struggle! After all, death is the last enemy. But rest assured that the Lord never fails to give dying-grace to the dying.

We must strive to be sensitive to the fears and feelings of the terminally ill. There are fears of being useless. There is the realization, almost surely disappointing, that his work, his contribution is ending. He has achieved as much as he will ever achieve, whether in vocation, or raising children, or forming relationships. There can also be a growing understanding and fear of the separation death will bring. There is the fear, too,

of becoming a burden. Serious illness is seen as imposing inconvenience on family and friends. Prolonged illness may be feared as being financially disastrous to survivors. There may be the fear of pain, which is inseparably linked to dying in most people's minds. There may be fears of personal indignity, of being subjected to medical procedures, to paraphernalia in the body, etc.

Be sensitive to what the dying says both verbally and non-verbally. Tears, turning to the wall, not wanting to talk — each of these says something.

To minister effectively to the terminally ill saint, one should try to understand the emotional stages they may pass through. It is striking that the terminal patient's grief before death is very similar to the grief experienced by the survivors after death. Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has given the classic description of the coping patterns of patients who know their diagnosis is terminal, in her book *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

The first stage is *denial*. "No, not me." "There must be a mistake of some kind."

Next comes *anger* or *resentment*. "Why me?" "Why now?"

The third stage is *bargaining*. "Yes me, but —" "If You just give me five years, I'll..." "I'll be a better father if you just give me another chance."

The fourth stage is *depression*. Now he says, "Yes, me." "I'll never feel good again." "I'll never see my grandchildren grow up."

Finally comes *acceptance*, a time of facing death calmly, of quiet submission to the Lord's way. "I am at peace." "I'm ready."

During visits we must strive to be sensitive to where the patient is, with respect to these stages, after a few minutes of conversation. But bear in mind that these stages are not like climbing a ladder. One does not necessarily go up one rung at a time. And the lines between them are not clearly drawn. Further, the dying saint may fluctuate from day to day

— anger on Monday, accepting on Wednesday, and back to anger on Friday.

Be sensitive too to the fact that the family, loved ones, are going through their own stages of anticipatory grief and may not always be in synchronization with the terminal patient. In this connection, the loved ones also need the pastor's care and must not be ignored. As much as or more than the ill, they need to be prepared for the reality of death.

Finally, be sensitive to *sin*; that is, recognize that the need of the sick, also the terminally ill, is fundamentally spiritual. Sickness and dying are inseparably connected to sin. There may be instances where a concrete sin may and must be pointed out — for example, drunkenness. But beyond this we cannot go. Generally it must be left between the individual and God. But be sensitive to a need there might be to talk about a sin. And lead the dying into the comfort of the gospel of our salvation.

#### 2. Preparation

This sensitivity with regard to the dying saint and his needs means that preparation for the visit is essential for the officebearer of Christ. Prayerfully prepare. Decide what to read and what to say. Take time to collect your thoughts, whether it be in the study or in the car. Focus on your purpose for visiting. Determine how the Word you are bringing will meet the need of the dying saint. Especially for lengthy illnesses, keep careful record of the visits, passages read, etc. Above all, pray! Be conscious of *your* dependence upon Christ in this difficult labor.

Then, having prepared, be flexible. Being sensitive to the needs of the dying saint, determine the situation that day (is it an "up" day or a "down" day), and minister to him with the Word and prayer. You may decide to bring an entirely different Word from that for which you prepared.

#### 3. Listening

Though this is an aspect of being sensitive to the needs of the dying saint, it deserves separate emphasis.



G. Clarke Chapman, Jr. writes in the foreword of Albert J.D. Walsh's book *Reflections on Death and Grief*, "When we are called to minister to the dying and/or bereaved, many of us who count ourselves as servants of God too easily prejudge the matter and rush in with words and a trite formula. Words have become our trade, jargon our bane, and verbiage our downfall." Perhaps it seems a harsh judgment, but in some instances it is undoubtedly deserved. This is one occasion in which we ought to "be swift to hear, slow to speak." After greeting them, listen! Let them tell you how they feel and what is going on with them. Do not assume anything. You may ask leading questions, you may guide the conversation to keep it on a spiritual level, but be sure to *listen*. Listening does not come easy. Walsh puts it this way in his book, *Reflections on Death and Grief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986): "When we truly listen to the dying and the bereaved, we will bear their pain in our heart, as though it were our own. Listening implies an honest, heartfelt, and courageous response to genuine suffering and the deep sense of loss death brings in its wake."

#### 4. Touch

Though the pastor or elder must always remember his office and maintain a ministerial dignity as the representative of Christ, he ought not overlook the power and significance of touch, especially with the terminally ill. A firm handshake, a gentle touch, a hand on the arm can say much more than many words. Feeling increasingly isolated from the world and people, the dying saint often desires and appreciates touch. Walsh writes, "I stress the importance of these expressions of affection and concern because my experience has been that the dying often feel untouchable, as though death were a contagious disease. We who would minister to the dying experience a curious sense of discomfort, making it difficult for us to reach out and touch and embrace. And this is the place for candor: death has a certain sight, smell, and sound

that can be distasteful." In "Help, I Have Cancer—My personal thoughts on what people can do for me," Pete Meulenberg writes, "Touch me as you leave. The isolation of having cancer makes the power of your touch sweet with love."

#### 5. Availability

The dying need their pastor! No matter how busy you are, take the time to visit. And let the dying saint and his family know that you are available at any hour, day or night, and that you want to be with them in times of crisis. Visits may need to be frequent. But the undershepherds of Christ must be with the sheep especially in their dying. The dying must be assured that you will be with them as they walk down the valley.

#### Life Support

It used to be much simpler, this whole business of dying. For the most part people used to die at home, often surrounded by their children and grandchildren. Now it may well be in the intensive care unit of the hospital, surrounded by tubes and needles, respirator, heart stimulator, etc. It was not long ago that the lack of heartbeat was considered final evidence of death. Because of modern medical technology the attention has shifted from heart to brain for a reliable criterion of when death has occurred. It is my conviction that there are no easy, pat answers as far as life support is concerned. Each case must be considered on its own merits.

As God's children we struggle along with the apostle Paul who was "in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Phil. 1:23, 24). Our testimony then must also be, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). The pastor must emphasize, in that light, that the main question for the child of God is not his recovery, not something physical, but *spiritual*. Is the dying content and even happy in the way of the Lord? Is he able to testify of that? Or are we assured of that?

Many factors must be considered with regard to life support, both its use and its removal. Obviously the medical condition is at the forefront. Many aspects must be weighed: prognosis, risk, treatments, success rate, pain, benefits. I believe it is wise to get a second medical opinion in most cases. Certainly legal aspects must be considered. State regulations, as well as hospital policy, are involved. Even financial factors ought not be ignored.

It is my conviction that the pastor and elders ought to refrain from "playing God" in any sense. They ought not seek to impose their will or opinion upon the dying or his family. As much as possible the undershepherds of Christ must be sympathetic and supportive of both patient and family. At the same time, the patient (if possible) and the family must be led to see and to be submissive to the will of God. They must be led in the Scriptures and through prayer to commit their way unto the Lord. And I believe that the Lord will make His will plain in due time. His grace will be sufficient both for the patient and for the family.

In conclusion, undoubtedly ministering to the terminally ill is some of the most difficult, yet at the same time some of the most spiritually edifying and rewarding, of an officebearer's labors. It is indeed blessed to walk with the saints down the valley. The grace of God is, indeed, amazing! To Him be the glory! □





# Pastoral Care Among Teenagers

Rev. Steven Key

As officebearers at this time in history we have much work cut out for us when it comes to necessary pastoral care among our youth. Let me add to that: It is important first of all that we take our calling seriously as overseers of the whole flock, including (I dare say, *especially*) our youth. Secondly, in this day when many scriptural principles are forsaken for theories of modern psychology, I would emphasize that we can only provide proper and profitable pastoral care by strict adherence to the principles of Scripture. But Scripture requires of pastors and elders especially that they provide spiritual direction and counsel for the youth of the church. That is not to overlook, and certainly not to exclude, the calling and responsibility that parents have toward the children God has placed within their own home. But we look now beyond the parental calling to that calling which is ours as officebearers, particularly as elders and pastors in churches with large numbers of young people.

## Necessary Labors

Although all teenagers must go through the struggles and difficulties of adolescence and require careful instruction and leadership by home and church, there are a few who require the special attention of pastors and elders. And though their number be still small in comparison to the many young people in our churches, one wonders if we do not see an increase of such cases in our day. I think we do. It would stand to reason. Our young people today face open temptations that were not faced by us

who are only one generation older.

The temptations were always there. Young people have always been tempted to rebel against authority figures — be it the temptation to defy the rules set down by parents, or teachers; or to get away with violating certain laws of the land. All generations have faced the temptations of alcohol abuse and fornication, to mention but two others. Peer pressure is as old as society itself. But in no other age have these temptations been so open and the attacks so violent against the innocence of Christian youth.

What was considered shameful just 20 years ago is now accepted matter-of-factly. Behavior that once was unacceptable even to unbelievers is now considered a part of growing up. To mention one example: some time ago I had an opportunity to work with two young men in their late teens, one of non-Christian background and the other nominally Christian. When these boys reached their middle teenage years, their parents actually encouraged them to go out and find an attractive girl with whom they could go to bed. They needed to find out what sex was all about. Now, you know that those parents had not been taught that in *their* youth. But the open fornication seen and accepted in our society has so influenced the thinking of people, even nominally Christian and church-going people, that they actually encourage their children to fornicate with the world!

Our young people can go into any number of gas stations and convenience stores or book stores, and see pornographic material displayed right in front of their eyes. The development of the VCR in the past ten years, and the proliferation of video stores, has put within the reach of our young people any number of reprobate movies. Sad to say, the watching

of video-taped movies within the family rooms of Protestant Reformed homes has reportedly become quite widespread. Advertising and television programming makes illicit sex glamorous, and puts increased pressure on youth to "join the crowd and get in on the action" — whether that be drinking beer to attract handsome men or beautiful women, or buying clothing and automobiles way beyond our earthly means (and to the neglect of our support of God's kingdom), or having sex outside the marriage bond.

Prosperity abounds in our day. This also has made a solid spiritual life all the more difficult for our young people. And when their parents set an example of running after every earthly idol and making a god out of pleasure (II Tim. 3:4), it is no wonder that with increasing numbers children are showing signs of deep-seated spiritual disease.

We point out another factor causing an increase in troubled youth. Our churches have not escaped the breakdown of the family structure that has reached epidemic proportions in our society. The sad fact is that there are in our churches more and more children that are being raised in single-parent situations, whose stable home life has been torn to pieces by the devastation of divorce.

All of these factors, in conjunction with the depravity of our natures, gives increase to the problems seen among our young people today. And the problems are real. It is easy as pastors and elders to bury our heads in the sand. After all, unless we have our finger firmly pressed against the pulse of our congregations, we will be the last to know about the sins with which our youth are struggling. Sometimes ignorance is bliss. But ignorance cannot address the issues properly or effectively.

*Rev. Key is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Randolph, Wisconsin.*



## Addressing the Problem

When it comes to addressing the problems seen among our youth, not to be overlooked is the preventive care essential in maintaining spiritual health among our young people. Foremost in preventive care is the faithful preaching of the Word. It is no mere coincidence that in churches where the faithful preaching of the Word has fallen by the wayside, there are multitudes of young people who show the effects of spiritual malnutrition, or have already spiritually died.

Solid preaching has a twofold effect upon the church's teenagers.

In the first place, such preaching bears the fruits of *spiritual* youth. It should not be necessary to expand upon this particular point among us. Let us remember, though, that God has ordained the faithful preaching of the gospel as the means of salvation and strengthening not only of adults, but children and young people. Those regenerated children who sit under faithful preaching, having been taught by their parents the need for attentiveness, will themselves grow spiritually and show fruits of spirituality.

But in the second place, preaching which is faithful in its exposition of the Scriptures and the calling Christ has given the church also bears as fruit a strong *family* life in the church. Where a church has been blessed by sound preaching for any length of time, there will be found a church characterized by families that are faithful in their calling within the home. And when we speak about preventive pastoral care among young people, essential is a family life characterized by spiritual-mindedness and an openness to speak about spiritual things and to live in a spiritual way.

Additional preventive medicine is to be administered in our catechism classes. Ministers do well to use those classes not only for solid biblical instruction in doctrine, but also to try to build a rapport with the young people. Here is an area where a longer stay in a pastorate is beneficial — when a relationship can be established beginning already when the children are



Rev. Steven Key

young. But even in a new pastorate, the minister can make catechism a place very beneficial toward building a healthy relationship with the youth of the church. Openness needs to be encouraged. In this setting, doctrine may be applied very particularly and discussion encouraged. Especially in areas where we do not have our own Christian high schools or where we have catechumens going to college, our youth run into particular difficulties either from a doctrinal point of view or in practice. If opportunity is given them to ask questions of a general nature at the end of the class, or if there is an open relationship between pastor (or elder) and young people, there may be an opportunity for conversation even after the conclusion of the catechism class.

Finally, still in the area of preventive medicine, we ought not be hesitant as elders or pastors to establish friendships with the church's young people. Establishing a friendship does not detract from the God-ordained authoritative function of the office. Rather it puts the office in the best possible light and makes the exercise of the office all the more effective. When a teenager sees an elder as a friend who is truly spiritual, and who cares for him in all areas of his life, that teenager will have much

appreciation for that officebearer of God. And such a relationship between an elder and a young person also has residual effects. It will be appreciated by godly parents, and noticed as well by the young person's companions and friends — with whom you, as an elder, may have opportunity to build more relationships.

Cleland Boyd McAfee, in his book *The Ruling Elder*, published by the Presbyterian Board of Christian Education in 1931, wrote: "When young people feel at home in the church, especially on the terms of real spiritual relationships, the strongest type of church develops.... In this relation to young people the session (consistory, SK) cannot be too watchful."

It is a mistake to suppose that young people object to true spirituality. We must not be afraid to use the Scriptures in our labors with youth. At the same time, there is no age group more sensitive to and contemptuous toward inconsistency in religious practice, which they will quickly term "hypocrisy." They may not be so quick to see it in themselves, but you may be sure they will see it in others, and especially officebearers, if it is there to see. Here, as in all our labors, a godly walk is essential.

When Peter wrote to the elders of the church (I Pet. 5:1-4), he did not pen an empty phrase, when he called us to be examples to the flock. And when the writer to the Hebrews calls God's people to follow the faith of the elders, considering the end of their conversation (Heb. 13:7), the clear implication is that elders must set a good example for the flock. That godly example is of particular importance in our labors with young people, who, in all their striving for independence, are still looking to others for examples. True spirituality among officebearers will also serve as a good vaccine among the youth, provoking many unto good works and genuine Christian piety.

But administering preventive medicine is only part of the calling of the pastor and elder. There are cases



that arise in any church where a young person suffers from a spiritual malady that is beyond the effects of preventive medicine. These cases must be treated not only by the pastor, but also by the elders of the church.

### Dealing With Specific and Individual Problems

In such cases several things are worthy of note.

A relationship of trust is essential. And when I speak of a relationship of trust, I refer to the fact that the young man or young woman with whom we labor must have a trust toward us. There are some young people, especially those with serious problems, who will not allow a relationship of trust. But if there is to be positive fruit upon our labors with any individual, a relationship of trust must first be established. And crucial to such trust is the knowledge that we deal in confidentiality. In many cases it is necessary that a consistory be fully or partially informed about the labors with an individual. But where that is so, we had better be sure that such matters are kept within the walls of the consistory room. Woe to those elders or ministers who violate the trust of certain individuals by making private matters public and who spread confidential matters. Such an officebearer makes himself worthy of discipline and possibly even dismissal from the office.

Secondly, genuine spiritual concern and care for the individual must also be conveyed by us in our work with young people. This should be our constant attitude as officebearers.

Nor should this be difficult, when we bear in mind the truth that Christ has given us the calling to work with those "which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). If Christ so loved His sheep, we who stand as His officebearers must love likewise. A young person who is caught in the snares of a sin or who is struggling spiritually is generally intimidated by authority figures. That is especially true of men who are regarded as spiritual bulwarks. If such a young person is to hear us, he must see that we are not "out to get him," but that we truly love him for Christ's sake and desire his good.

We must also have a solid knowledge of the Scriptures, if we are to labor properly among troubled youth. This stands to reason. Our entire calling as officebearers is summarized in the calling to "bring the Word." We must know our Bibles thoroughly, also searching them regularly to see what Word of God applies well to given situations and sins with which God's young people struggle. But, more than bare knowledge, we must seek from God wisdom in how to apply the Scriptures to the given case with which we deal. Patrick Fairbairn, in his book *Pastoral Theology*, points out "that a pastor has often much more to do with those who seek advice from him regarding their soul's interests than quote a few passages of Scripture and point their way to the Savior" (p. 286). Though the Scripture must serve as the foundation of all pastoral work, and must be our "tool for the trade," that does not necessarily mean that we come with

our Bibles in every situation with a passage to read and apply. Sometimes we have to be walking Bibles, simply applying the principles of Scripture, rather than quoting texts. But, in every case, searching questions need carefully to be asked, in order to provide sound spiritual guidance and instruction.

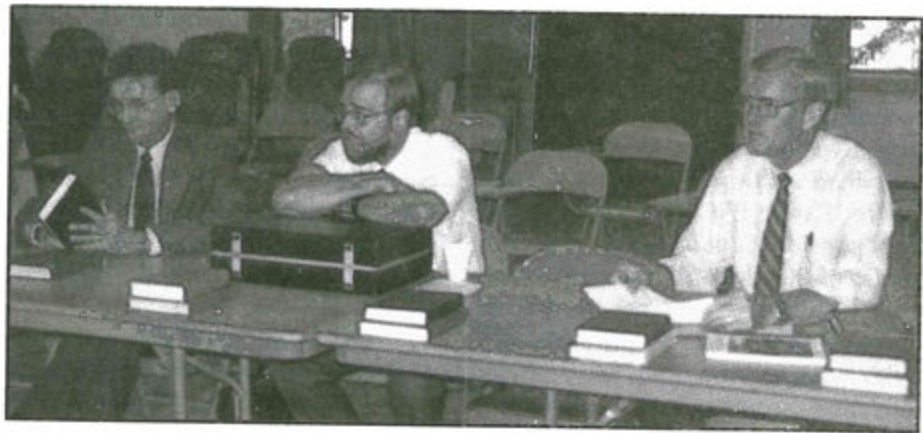
---

*Too often  
as elders and pastors  
we tend to deal only with  
the symptoms  
of a person's problem.*

---

In this connection it should be added that pastors and elders need to work at and develop *listening* skills. It is always a danger that we speak too soon, thereby bypassing the real needs. Always we must listen carefully and seek to listen more. We must search for the deepest need. Then we apply the Word. Too often as elders and pastors we tend to deal only with the symptoms of a person's problem. We try to correct the most obvious situation, and achieving that correction feel as if we have solved the problem. This is like giving an aspirin to a person with bone cancer. To use one illustration, when a young person's church attendance falls off, and there is neglect of the means of grace, we must not be hasty in focusing on that one problem. The neglect of the means of grace is always a symptom of a deeper spiritual problem. What is the deeper problem? Why the lack of desire to attend the house of God for worship? To fail to address the deeper problem is to become guilty of treating the symptoms, but neglecting the killer disease. To listen is an essential aspect of all pastoral work, but most necessary in dealing with youth.

Patience is another necessary virtue in pastoral care among teenagers. If you "blow up" in your dealings with a young person, you have just blown for good any opportunity to labor for his salvation. We must rec-





ognize that in most young people there is a certain level of immaturity and irresponsibility. This can become irritating at times. But in our care for such youth, our irritation must be suppressed. I do not mean to imply that with patience we must avoid all firm instruction and admonitions. Where there are particular sins, and a rejection of admonitions and instruction, there must be reproof given in a firm but loving manner. Patience must never prevent us from providing firm direction. But patience must be exercised with a view to the general weaknesses of youth. Immaturity and signs of irresponsibility must not anger us in a pastoral setting, so that it prevents us from dealing with the deeper issues. In addition, when we speak about patience, we must realize that the Spirit works in His children over a period of time and through consistent labors. We need patience also to wait upon the Lord, seeking His blessing upon our labors.

This, however, points to another need — that of consistency in our work. Consistent labors must be given those young people in whom we observe particular problems.

It is a serious mistake, when there are concrete symptoms of spiritual illness or a sinful walk, that elders make an initial visit only to let the issue lie for several months. Though this matter reaches beyond our work with wayward youth, it deserves emphasis. Our pastoral or disciplinary labors must be consistent and ongoing, until the person is completely restored or reveals unbelief and departs. I urge our elders to make *regular* and *frequent* visits in all cases where problems are evident. Such regular and frequent visits (at a very minimum once a month, while greater frequency is desirable in many cases) will prove to be the most effective and ultimately the least time-consuming way to do the work. A person who is walking in sin will often receive the elders of the church, if they visit only once a year or once every few months. Such a person can "put up with the elders for an hour," if his receiving them "keeps them off his back" for

another few months while he continues in his sin.

On the other hand, visits made regularly and frequently will convey to the person a sense of urgency and deep concern on the part of God's officebearers. The effects of such consistent labor will be seen much more quickly than with inconsistent and infrequent visits. Either the person will be given by God to see the seriousness of his sin, and will be led by the Word to confess and turn from his sin in the sorrow of repentance; or he will soon refuse to see the elders that are frequently darkening his doorstep. The Word not received will become an irritant to him. For the welfare of the church I urge you elders: Bring the Word with frequency to those walking in sin or struggling with various problems.

Although such has been implied throughout this writing, I want to emphasize the importance of elders becoming personally and directly involved in working with the youth of the church. The church in centuries past has recognized the importance of consistory's laboring with the church's youth. Article 44 of our Church Order, which speaks of the calling of the classical church visitors, requires them "to take heed whether the minister and consistory ... properly promote as much as lies in them, through word and deed, the upbuilding of the congregation, in particular of the youth."

As a pastor I readily acknowledge that my calling is not only the pulpit ministry, but the pastoral ministry as well. Although, without question, the preaching of the Word must have the chief place in our labors as pastors, we also are called to follow the example of the apostle Paul, who ministered not only publicly, but from house to house (Acts 20:20). But let it be clearly understood, pastoral oversight is primarily the calling of the *elders* of the church. To you elders comes the calling of Acts 20:28, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he

hath purchased with his own blood." Not to be neglected in your pastoral oversight as elders are the youth of the church.

McAfee, in the book cited above, states that it can be most helpful in the consistory's work with young people, that a fair number of young elders be brought into the consistory. At the same time, he points out that an elder need not be young to have a strong relationship with the youth of the



church. He writes, "In one church this natural friend of the young people was the senior elder, well in his eighties, but any young person would have gone to him as naturally with a suggestion for the session as if he had been a member of the Young People's Society. A deeply spiritual life is not forbidding or restraining to others if it is warm and winsome" (*op. cit.*, p. 163).

At the same time, we must recognize that God gives different gifts to each of His chosen officebearers. Just as all pastors differ in gifts, so do elders. Where one elder is not as comfortable as another in caring for the afflicted, such will be the case also in caring for the youth of the church. At the same time, elders must be encouraged to develop in the labors of their office. The most difficult part of any difficult task is usually getting started. An elder who devotes himself to labors among the youth of the church will grow through those labors.

Fervent prayer is necessary in all our labors of a pastoral nature. This is a matter that can be emphasized in



all areas of pastoral labor; but I will certainly emphasize it here. In dealing with difficulties among youth, and with particular individuals, you often will not know, at least initially, the problems which you must treat. For the most part, therefore, in the initial stages of working with an individual, you will not know what Scripture passages you might study in preparation for your meeting. Your preparation will be confined primarily to that of prayer. And let it be fervent prayer, prayer for wisdom, for patience, for knowledge, and for the presence of the Holy Spirit in your labors.

Finally, I must say something about laboring with rebellious and impenitent youth. The remedy of Christian discipline must, according to Scripture, be exercised also toward the young people of the church who are obstinate in their rebellion against God. That is the clear teaching of Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

There are those children of the church who, to our sorrow, do not walk in the way of God's precepts, who reject all parental and pastoral care and instruction and show no impenitence for their sinful walk. Some of those are wayward only for a time; others go astray never to return to the shadow of the cross and the bosom of the church. We must not let our treatment of such young people be governed merely by our emotions and natural parental love. We must treat them with the love of God, which seeks God's glory and walks in obedience to His Word and instruction. To the principle set forth in Deuteronomy 21:18-21 you and I must give heed and wholehearted obedience, lest the wrath of God rest upon us not only as families, but as a church.

The children whose example is set forth in Deuteronomy 21—youth

people stubborn in their sinful rebellion—are a great threat to the church's welfare. By their carnal lives they influence other young people in the church. And if they are allowed to continue undisciplined in their rebelliousness, not only will they go to hell, but they will take the church (as an institute) with them! And although the emphasis in the text referred to is that of parental responsibility, there is clear instruction given also to the elders of the church. The elders are called to execute judgment according to the law of God. I do not mean to imply that the elders in the New Testament church should execute God's judgment by stoning. But they are still called to declare the sentence of death upon all who reject Christ and His Word and way. The judgment that they execute is the judgment rendered in Christian discipline, and especially by excommunication (cf. Matt. 16:19; 18:15-18; I Cor. 5; II Thess. 3:14, 15).

After the elders have worked faithfully and have brought the Word of God to that young person, only to see the Word rejected and the heart hardened, the elders must cut off such a rebel from the church. Such discipline is, according to God's inscrutable purpose, "the last remedy." In certain cases God in mercy will use such discipline eventually to work repentance in the heart of him toward whom this remedy is applied.

Do we love the church? Do we love the youth of the church? Then let us heed our calling in providing preventive medicine for all our youth, and surgical remedies of counseling and discipline in the individual cases where necessary. Negligence is far too prevalent today in these things. May God be pleased to use us for the strengthening of the church by the nurture of her youth. □

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### NOTICE!! **Antichrist**

by Rev. Barry Gritters

A new pamphlet (\$1.00) published by the Byron Center Evangelism Committee. Available from:

Leonard Holstege  
1522 144th St.  
Dorr, MI 49323

### NOTICE!!

All students enrolled in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, who will be in need of financial assistance for the coming school year, are asked to contact the Student Aid Committee Secretary, Mr. Larry Meulenberg. (Phone [616]453-8466.) This contact should be made no later than March 15.

Student Aid Committee  
Larry Meulenberg, Secretary

### NOTICE!!

All standing and special committees of Synod, as well as individuals who wish to address Synod 1993, are hereby notified that all material for the 1993 Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches should be in the hands of the Stated Clerk no later than April 1. (Please note the earlier date—as determined by Synod 1992, **Acts**, Article 54, B, 3, a.)

Rev. M. Joostens  
2016 Tekonsha S.E.  
Grand Rapids, MI 49506.