

# On Being Pastors of the Cross

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Two statements from the Acts of the Apostles are significant: ‘great grace was upon them all’ (4:33) and ‘When [Barnabas] came [to Antioch] and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced’ (11:23).<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we should acknowledge the range of meaning which the word translated as ‘grace’ can have.<sup>2</sup> In the first statement there is the possibility that the reference to grace is to the ‘favour’ with which the believers were regarded by the people, if not by the Jewish leaders (cf. Acts 2:47<sup>3</sup>). But the second statement does set the principle more clearly. If it was ‘favour’ that Barnabas saw, it was the favour of God. What is more, given the whole biblical picture of humanity, that favour did not rest upon them because of any virtue they had. So translating the word as ‘grace’ in Acts 4:33 would mean that the great power in the apostles’ testimony and also the transformation in the attitudes within the community of believers were no less than the action of God’s grace.

But historical studies and questions concerning words, while having their place, must not lead us away from the astounding reality that ‘great grace *is* upon the church’. In particular, that means that we understand the church as being totally under the direction of her Saviour and completely dependent upon his work. Grace is not a theological preference, distinct from some other approach which others may have; it is the way things are and must be.

## **JESUS: THE SHEPHERD OF THE CROSS**

In stark contrast to the false shepherds of Israel, Jesus was (and is) the righteous shepherd. The Lord, the shepherd, leads the flock in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. He has concern for his holy name and for the holiness of his Father’s name. Thus:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.<sup>12</sup> The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my own translation or paraphrases.

<sup>2</sup> χάρις (*charis*). See the lexica for the various uses. It is important that we do not assume that a word always carries the same translation meaning.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Having the goodwill [χάριν, *charin*] of all the people.’ However, that ‘favour’ need not be taken as ‘popularity’ as shown in Acts 5:13.

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away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.<sup>13</sup> The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.<sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,<sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.<sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.<sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.<sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:11–18).

The only way that Jesus can be the good shepherd is to die for the sheep, to actually lay down his life in obedience to the Father's command. Hebrews 9:14 reminds us that he can only do that 'through the eternal Spirit' so that the whole action of bringing all the flock into the fold is Trinitarian. But again, that is not merely a theological preciseness. If he is to be the righteous shepherd then he must be led by the Spirit.

The issue that lies at the heart of this is the matter of human guilt. The shepherd cannot lead in the paths of righteousness until guilt is removed. He came to save his people from their sins and to take away the sin of the world and that means his death is essential to the divine purposes. He was, then, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. He is only the great shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant. Otherwise, those who attempt to ascend the hill of the Lord and to worship in his holy presence will not have clean hands or a pure heart and will then suffer the fate of those offering unholy fire (cf. Heb. 6:4–8). But the shepherd administers the eternal covenant so the flock is purified and made holy through him.

### **THE FLOCK LIVES BY THE CROSS**

As Paul reflects on his unique apostolic ministry, he makes the following observations:

I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless on some points I have written to you rather boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God<sup>16</sup> to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:14–16).

He regards his ministry as the expression of all that Israel ought to have been and done. He is a minister of Christ Jesus, though he does not use the word normally associated with such serving, that is, *διάκονος* (*diakonos*). Instead he uses the word *λειτουργός* (*leitourgos*) which refers to a service often performed in association with 'religious' (meaning civic) duty.<sup>4</sup> He serves in 'the priestly service<sup>5</sup> of the gospel of God' and he brings 'the offering of the Gentiles'. Whether this is the offering *from* the Gentiles (Rom. 15:31; 1 Cor. 16:1) or the offering which comprises the Gentiles (Rom. 1:5–6) is not plain (I lean towards the latter), but the offering is acceptable because it has been sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>4</sup> *λειτουργός* in Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago University Press, Chicago (1958), 1979, p. 471. See also H. Strathmann, R. Meyer, *λειτουργέω* κτλ in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977), pp. 215–31 who see this as particularly pertaining to the verb.

<sup>5</sup> *ἱεροουργούντα*, *hierourgounta*.

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This is the picture of the nations standing alongside Israel, all completely holy. Were they not holy, none could stand before God. But the stress is that their holiness is a gift and is received by faith alone:

I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:17–18).

The notion that sanctification is a process, subsequent to justification, whereby we move towards holiness is deadly to the church. It goes without saying that at no stage is there any room for licence—living in sin that grace may abound—but neither is there place for measuring ourselves and others against law. Sanctification is a gift (Rom. 6:22–23) to be received by faith and not ever by acts of obedience to law.

It is by the work of the cross that the church is freed to live in its holiness. The position of Israel as a sanctified, worshipping community was always dependent on the sacrifice of atonement (so Lev. 16:1–22, 23ff.); the same is true for the community of the redeemed. Their worship is dependent on and derives from the mercies of God (Rom. 12:1–12).

What is sadly conspicuous from the New Testament churches onwards is the human inclination to return to law as the standard by which we measure ourselves and others. There are a number of results which emerge from this. The first is that we may become totally discouraged by our own failures or those of others. The second is its opposite, namely that there may be an arrogance based on assumed success. A third is that the truth of the gospel is submerged under the very thing from which we have been freed, namely the law's power to condemn, so that discouragement or arrogance cannot be brought to the light of the gospel at all. Gerhard Forde, analysing Luther's arguments on this matter, wrote:

The law cannot save. The shocking fact is that the law is not a remedy for sin, although we never quite seem to believe that. Indeed, when righteousness before God is at stake, it only makes matters worse . . .

Therefore the law can't save us. To think that it can is the fundamental mistake of the theologian of glory. The law is not a remedy for sin. It does not cure sin but rather makes it worse. St. Paul says it was given to make sin apparent, indeed, even to *increase* it. It doesn't do that necessarily by increasing immorality, although that can happen when rebellion or the power of suggestion leads us to do just what the law is against. But what the theologian of the cross sees clearly from the start is that, more perversely, the law multiplies sin precisely through our morality, our misuse of the law and our success at it. It becomes a defense against the gift.<sup>6</sup>

Where there is need of correction or direction then it will not come through imposed regulations. What results from that is not correction but conformity. So often there is pressure to measure up or leave, or even to be sent to some form of 'Coventry', especially within groups that have a greater measure of control over their adherents. But the Scriptures take a different line:

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. <sup>2</sup> Bear one

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<sup>6</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997, pp. 24, 27.

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another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup> For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. <sup>4</sup> All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. <sup>5</sup> For all must carry their own loads (Gal. 6:1–5).

### THE JUSTIFIED CHURCH

Paul insisted that many of the problems within the Corinthian congregation were the fruit of them failing to see that they were a justified people. This was the case with the factions that divided the church (1 Cor. 1:10–18) and with the attitude towards wrongdoers. In 1 Corinthians 6, dealing with the matter of application to non-Christian legal processes within their relationships, he notes that it is better to bear the losses rather than wrong other believers. And far better not to cause offence in the first place. The readers needed to realise that sin is deadly, but they also needed to realise that there was more than just a warning; the truth was that:

... this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:11).

Peter's first letter commences with a similar recognition:

[You] have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood (1 Pet. 1:2).

The issue is not in which order things happened, but in this sentence sanctification was with the purpose of and resulted in justification:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls (1 Pet. 2:24–25).

The justified church is the church which cannot be held by any condemnation. That includes the individual members of the church also. The principle is then that neither the church nor its individual members may be manipulated or coerced by law, that is by guilt. This is not merely a matter of good business practice but the simple and plain stance of the Scriptures:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us (Rom. 8:31–34).

There is no place for control within the church of God. There is one shepherd, to whom the under-shepherds submit as do the rest of the flock (Heb. 13:7, 17). Even when there are clear disagreements over some issues, the fact of the church's justification prohibits judgement being imposed (as distinct from discernment):

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. . . . <sup>7</sup> We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. <sup>8</sup> If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to

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the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.<sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living (Rom. 14:4, 7–9).

Given this, the under-shepherds must not 'lord it over those in [their] charge, but [must be] examples to the flock' (1 Pet. 5:3). I should add that there is no place for under-shepherds to be entrepreneurs, either; rather they should be humble servants. Of course, 'gifted' people should use their gifts.

### **THE CHURCH DOES NOT NEED TO JUSTIFY ITSELF**

If one of the battles in the early church was against the demand that the church prove its justification by its adherence to or adoption of Jewish law (Acts 15:1–30; Gal. passim), then the same battle is being waged now. However, the forms of required 'proof' may vary. Always, though, it seems that the battle between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory remains at the heart.

The wisdom of God is found in his choice to be the God who sent his Son to the cross for the justification of God. So when Paul did not come proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty human wisdom there is good sense in the choice.<sup>7</sup> The wisdom of God is hidden 'in a mystery' (1 Cor. 2:7)<sup>8</sup> and attempts to impress others with the wisdom of God are actually attempts to remove the foolishness and the scandal of the cross. Were the church to prove itself by means of its success, in whatever form, then the cross would be emptied. The mystery of the cross has brought into being the mystery of the church:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.<sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;<sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,<sup>29</sup> so that no one might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor. 1:26–29).

This is not to suggest that a growing church is not healthy or desirable or that a passion to 'go' with the great truths of the gospel should be hindered;<sup>9</sup> merely that it will always be the Lord who causes the church to grow (Acts 2:47; Matt. 16:18). *The church* which has 'a name for being alive' is in grave danger; it may in fact be moribund (Rev. 3:1–2). Neither size nor prosperity, neither weakness nor affliction, neither theological acumen nor simple intellectual understanding prove anything.

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<sup>7</sup> In 1 Cor. 2:1 the choice is between μυστήριον and μαρτύριον, with the textual evidence favouring the former and the translations the latter.

<sup>8</sup> ἀλλὰ λαλοῦμεν θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ, τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην.

<sup>9</sup> The matter of the church going with the gospel is not in question here; see Geoffrey Bingham, *Christ's Living Church—Today* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1993), p. 33: '... unless it is essentially a *going* church, it will not truly be a "going" concern'. My present concern here is simply that where evangelism is with a view to something other than or beside the wisdom of God in the cross then there will be a defective proclamation and a defective view of our justification. Were an evangelist to be concerned to prove his own capacities as an evangelist, thus justifying his call, it would be small wonder that the evangelised followed that pattern. Of course we will all lament our mixed motives in these things. Geoff Bingham continued: 'There are churches which seem to be going concerns, yet if the gospel preached is examined, it may be seen that this or that congregation is a church starved of grace but heavily supplied with law' (p. 33).

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## THE POWER IN THE CHURCH

For the good shepherd to die for the sheep required great power, but of himself he had none. All the power lay in the Father's command:

No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:18).

Against so much that is taught, Christ was crucified in weakness (2 Cor. 13:4). His humanity was not that of a super-man but that of a (the) true man, totally dependent on the Father. We should see the same thing in 1 Corinthians 2:3–5:

And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.<sup>4</sup> My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,<sup>5</sup> so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

But from the beginning was the word. It brought the original creation into being and also the new creation (2 Cor. 4:6; James 1:18). It is the same utterance by which faith was born (Rom. 10:17) that sustains the creation through to the goal (Heb. 1:3). It is also the word which sustains the church:

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.<sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice (John 10:3–4).

There are three occasions when Paul analysed his ministry in terms of the powerful word:

... by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ (Rom. 15:19).

I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known ... (Col. 1:25).

But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth (2 Tim. 4:17).

On each occasion Paul says more than just that *he* has fully preached. In Romans 15 it is not that 'I have fulfilled the gospel' but that the gospel has been fulfilled!<sup>10</sup> This is what Christ, not Paul, has done (Rom. 15:18)! In Colossians, Paul saw his commission as being 'to fulfil the word of God'<sup>11</sup> and in Timothy, it was that 'the proclamation should be fulfilled'.<sup>12</sup> These are not mere disputes over words, I trust. The issue is that the word of God, the gospel of Christ, the proclamation, all ultimately the same thing because the same God in Christ speaks, contains a dynamic which is at work and which will not rest until all is brought to the goal (Isa. 55:10–11). And that is the word of

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<sup>10</sup> ὥστε με ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ καὶ κύκλῳ μέχρι τοῦ Ἰλλυρικοῦ πεπληρωκένας τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

<sup>11</sup> κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ.

<sup>12</sup> ἵνα δι' ἐμοῦ τὸ κήρυγμα πληροφωρηθῇ.

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God, which is not the Bible per se,<sup>13</sup> but the living word of the living God, the Spirit speaking to the churches. Hence the great gift of prophecy to the church (see 1 Cor. 14). The risen Lord speaks to his people, the shepherd goes on speaking to the flock so that the flock will go on hearing and following.

It is the great shepherd of the flock by the blood of the eternal covenant who speaks and leads. Under-shepherds will not only humbly serve the flock because they serve the great shepherd, but they too will delight to hear his voice and to live by it. Why should they—we—want to be anything other than pastors of the cross? The great grace upon the church is upon us all. To see that grace is transforming joy! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is with us all.

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<sup>13</sup> We should not need to say this, but I must stress our total submission to ‘the Word written’ because it is the definitive prophetic and apostolic testimony to Christ, but that Christ himself remains the effective speaker in all things.