

The Word and the Church

The Greatest Influence

When church leaders get together to look at improving a congregation's effectiveness, they might discuss worship services, small group ministry, community presence, and leadership. In these discussions, it's easy to overlook the single most powerful catalyst for church health and growth. This catalyst is overlooked because it's quiet and personal. It cannot be organised, budgeted or programmed. It can only be conveyed by God's Spirit, and taught by God's church. What is it? *The Bible*. God's self-revelation. Research proves its power. But we shouldn't need the research. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The Highest Priority

There are many components of worship services that people appreciate. Music. Prayer. Stories and other creative elements. But there's compelling research that shows there's something that supersedes all of these—the Word of God and its challenge to personal life. People come to church with a craving to hear God himself. You'd think they'd find him, every week! But indications are that more than 50 per cent go away with only modest satisfaction or no satisfaction at all. People come to hear God speak, and they hear humans prattling. They come to be provoked by God's Word, and instead they're made comfortable by the word of man. Let's give top place to the Word of the Lord!

A Craving for the Word

A church with relevant teaching on everyday topics will be an excellent church, right? A church with programmes and activities for all will be healthy and growing, right? Actually, No. It's fascinating to see some outstanding Christian leaders returning to a simple foundation—the Bible and its power. Spiritual activities are needed, but they don't produce a deep connection with God. Topical sermons might be helpful, but they don't translate into steady spiritual growth. People crave in-depth Bible teaching. The church grows through solid Bible preaching. Jesus expressed it something like this: "People who receive the Word as seed on good soil are the ones who hear the Word and understand it. Then follows a good crop."

Effective in the Word

Think about the most effective preachers in modern times. Such as Peter Marshall, G. Campbell Morgan, Dwight L. Moody, John Stott, John Piper, Charles Swindoll, Corrie ten Boom, H. M. S. Richards, Billy Graham. It doesn't matter which list you look at—there's one thing in common. What's in common is not the style or approach; these are as varied as the personalities themselves. What's in common is the Word of God. Like the apostle Paul, effective preachers preach not themselves, but Christ crucified. It's not the men and women who have power; the power is in God and his Word. Preachers and Bible teachers today: Let's be baptised in the Word, love the Word, proclaim the Word. Nothing else.

“In Christ”

Intimate Rest

“In Christ.” It’s a dominant theme that deserves massive attention. But it gets little. In the New Testament there are more than 240 direct or indirect references to being “in Christ”. The phrase depicts *a fixed position of intimate rest*. Picture a bird in the nest, a joey kangaroo in the pouch, an astronaut in a space suit. Outside is danger, fear, even death. Inside is safety, peace, life. In biblical Greek and modern English, “in” means *in!* Not alongside, behind, ahead of, over, or near—but *in*. This is the relationship available to us, the closeness to himself that God proposes. How is it for you today? Are you alongside, behind, or near? Jesus opens his heart and his arms and says, “Come on *in*.”

Transforming Reality

“In Christ.” The concept appears more than 240 times in the New Testament. But you won’t find it in the gospels, except for one place—John 17. In his holy prayer to the Father shortly before his death, Jesus pleaded “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us. . . . May they be one as we are one: I in them and you in me.” It’s a mistake to see this as talking merely about Christians having unity. This is talking about our personal standing and our identity. If you want an excellent exercise for today, spend an hour on this thought: You may be one with Christ, *as Christ is one with his Father*. You in Christ. Christ in you. Now that’s transforming!

New Identity

“In Christ” It’s a question of identity. Children establish their identity in their parents. Teens in their peers. Adults in a variety of sources—society, work, family, church, possessions, knowledge, hobbies, self-understanding. People in witness protection programmes sometimes establish a new identity. This can be a matter of life and death. Christ invites us to establish a new identity in him—a matter of life and death. What it means is that my whole being becomes characterised by Christ, energised by Christ. “For me to live is Christ.” Work? *In Christ*. Family? *In Christ*. Hobbies? *In Christ*. Spirituality? *In Christ*. I live, move and thrive in Christ. I love my new identity!

Fresh Experience

“In Christ.” It’s a massive theme of the New Testament. But in the gospels, we find only one mention. Why so little? Jesus explained, “I have much more I want to share with you, but you can’t bear it now.” What was the “much more”, and when did Jesus finally share it? The “much more” turned out to be a totally new teaching—the mysterious privilege of receiving God’s Spirit and living *in Christ*. The Spirit delivered this teaching through Paul. “God was pleased to reveal his Son in me,” said the apostle—and Paul made the “in Christ” mystery the heartbeat of his message. Paul’s own fresh experience began on the Damascus Road, and continued in the Arabian desert. Has it happened for you? Has Christ appeared on your Damascus Road, and by the Spirit are you “in him” today?

Astonishing Privilege

“In Christ.” It’s the piece of Jesus’ teaching that had to wait until the mighty working of the Spirit through the apostle Paul. “In Christ” is a mystery prepared before the world began; hidden from Abraham, Moses and David. Want a powerful Bible study? Examine Galatians 1, 1 Corinthians 2, 2 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 3, Colossians 1, and Romans 8. See how the Holy Spirit unites believers in complete oneness with Father and Son. It’s astonishing. Immersed in God’s love. Having in you “the mind of Christ”. You can’t manufacture this; you won’t always feel it. But it’s true anyway. God sees you in Christ, hears you in Christ, teaches you in Christ, keeps you in Christ. Relax; enjoy the privilege!

Profound Truth

“In Christ.” It’s not a sweet spot just for ourselves. The “in Christ” message embraces the disadvantaged, the discouraged, the disgusting, and the deceived. Jesus extended his “in Christ” prayer to all in the world who are called into faith (John 17:20, 21). The shocking revelation given to Paul was that ungodly people are invited into equal standing in Christ (Ephesians 3:4–9). This is a profound truth—the people you don’t like, the ones you diminish, are potentially or actually just as privileged as you are in Christ. The “in Christ” message rebukes our prejudices, our argumentation and our divisions. This applies in the church and in society. In Christ, we stop our fighting and begin our loving. Let’s take stock of this important truth today.

Everything Desired

In Christ, we have every heavenly blessing it’s possible for us to have on Earth—because in Christ is all of Heaven. From the New Testament, it’s possible to make a list of around 90 things that are ours in Christ. Examples: Assurance, cleansing, comfort, endurance, every good thing, forgiveness, healing, holiness, the Holy Spirit, joy, purity, rest, righteousness, security, strength, unity, victory, wisdom. Our living is in Christ, along with our good behaviour, our suffering, our worship, our witness, and our dying. If we try to find these in ourselves, in stand-alone doctrine, or even in relationship with church, we’ll be miserable. They are found in Christ—in deep, personal abiding in him. Praise God for this!

Incredible Presence

I am in Christ, and Christ is in me. Paul uses these dual expressions interchangeably. *First: I am in Christ.* When Jesus was in the carpenter shop and the wilderness of temptation, I was there—in him. At his baptism and his miracles, I was there. At the Cross, the resurrection, the ascension, and Pentecost, I was there. In his ministry in Heaven right now, I am there—in him. *Second: Christ is in me.* At the supermarket and at my job, he is there—in me. In my Bible study and my family life, he is there. In my temptations and sins, he is there. In my recreation, my witness and my pain, he is there—in me. Incredible! “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever! Amen.” (Ephesians 3:21.)

Change and Church

Out of the Circle

It's a short hop from "institution" to "institutionalism". That's a fancy way of saying that change comes hard, especially for organisations. Change is difficult enough in our individual lives. Put many individuals together in a collective body; wait a number of years for a cycle of practices and rituals to become entrenched; then watch as war erupts when someone suggests change might be needed. It's an old problem, deep in human nature. To the Israelites in the wilderness God said, "You've been going around in circles in these hills long enough; go north." Moses pleaded, "Don't continue doing things the way we're doing them at present." (Deuteronomy 2:3; 12:8; The Message.) This rings true today—time for God's church to sacrifice comfort, step out of its circle, and go north.

Upset by Jesus

Those who feel wonderful when things stay the same will be upset by Jesus. "I've come to change everything, turn everything rightside up. . . . Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I've come to disrupt and confront!" After one startling miracle, people asked Jesus to leave—"too much change, too fast, and they were scared" (Luke 12:49–51; 8:37; The Message). Guess what? Jesus complied. He left. He looked for another place, where the change he personified would be welcomed. How is it in your life and church? Is there a desire to keep everything nice and smooth? Or is there eagerness for Jesus and the radical change he brings?

Willing to Risk

The turtle makes progress only when it sticks its neck out. Churches make progress only when members are willing to take risks—to change, to stretch, to grow. The mission is uncomfortable! But comfort is not the issue; the Cross is the issue (Luke 9:23). About 2 per cent of church members might initiate positive change; and 18 per cent welcome it. About 60 per cent are typically OK with the change once it's rolling. A further 18 per cent eventually come around to accept it; while 2 percent reject it and leave. How can we love each other during change? How can we keep our spiritual moorings? Only through attachment to the Rock that moves with us, and that Rock is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4).

Invitation to Adventure

"Of all forces acting on man, change is the most beneficial and the most cruel." It's an old truth, fresh today. Change is in the heart of salvation; therefore it must be in the heart of the church. If we stay the same, the world will stay the same too. As we change, we must be aware of the impact. Even positive change can bring uncertainty, anxiety, confusion, fear, anger, resentment, and grief. What's needed? Reassurance, clear communication, honesty, acknowledgement, affirmation, appreciation, patience. Plus an invitation to adventure—extending ourselves upward and outward, as harvest workers for God. "Why not go out on a limb? Isn't that where the fruit is?" (Frank Scully).

A Covenant in Christ

Guaranteed Victory

“Promises are made to be broken.” It’s a pathetic conclusion that often applies to us, but never applies to God. “Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed” (Joshua 24:14). Hundreds of times in the Bible, God’s promises are expressed as part of his *covenant*—his agreement, contract, commitment, and guarantee. It started when sin started. As soon as there was a problem, there was a promise. “I won’t let this tragedy go on for ever. I’m declaring war against the enemy. I’ll raise up a Conqueror from within humanity. He’ll be wounded. But he’ll completely crush the devil—and we will win!” (See Genesis 3:15.) Hallelujah! Praise God for his covenant promise.

Everlasting Contract

You’ve heard of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. But don’t forget the contract behind both of them—the “everlasting covenant”. Nine books of the Bible refer directly to an everlasting, or eternal, covenant. It’s God’s permanent guarantee of life—given at Eden; declared at Mount Sinai; renewed through Noah, Abraham and David; and made effective in the climactic death and resurrection of the Messiah. Human covenants are fragile, printed on paper and signed with ink. God’s eternal covenant is signed with his own blood and printed on your life and mine (Hebrews 13:20, 21). God’s covenant is our promise for life, our charter for the church, and our message for the world.

The Simple Centre

Old Covenant, New Covenant. It can be confusing, but here’s simplicity. The Old is the way God demonstrated his rescue plan in history, leading up to the death of Christ. The New is the expression of the rescue itself, when Christ came in the fullness of time. In both cases, the Cross is the centre. In old times, people saw Christ in shadows. Now, we see Christ in his brilliance. Once there were priests, a sanctuary, sacrifices. Now Christ is our Priest, our sanctuary, our sacrifice. “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant. . . . We have been made holy through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ once and for all.” (Hebrews 9:15; 10:10.) Can you see your privilege? As a believer, your qualification for Heaven is secured by Christ. It’s God’s New Covenant promise, and you can stake your life on it.

Holy Freedom

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). With these words, Christ took the precious law and promises of the ancient Scriptures and ushered them through his own person into a fresh and vital framework. The old system had been tarnished by thousands of man-made rules by which people tried to earn their right to Heaven. Christ inaugurated a new way free from condemnation, bright with holiness, and joy-filled in the presence of the Holy Spirit. “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life” (Romans 6:22). Are you finding your peace in this holy freedom today?

Confronting Anxiety

About My World

Natural disasters. Human-caused calamities. Racial and religious tensions. Crimes. Wars. Terrorism. Environmental threats. If you want something to worry about, you can choose freely from at least a dozen items on our daily news. Pain, loss and insecurity appear as the dominant story of our planet. Decades of “enlightenment” haven’t solved human issues. This can get to us. But when it gets to us, we must get it to God. He’s our help, our healing, our hope. When your heart breaks over the world, give yourself to the One whose heart was broken long ago. “God so loved the world.” God has a plan for the world he loves. Your own breaking heart and trusting prayers are a big part of that plan.

About My Life

A Christian minister walked with a rich friend one day and said, “Brother, I have not a care in the world. I am as happy as the birds and just as free.” The friend replied, “I would give all that I possess to be able to say that.” The care-free minister had in his pockets that very moment letters describing issues of deep concern. Are there deep concerns in your life? Over finances, family, health, work, relationships? What choice are you making about these concerns? Our natural choice—to worry, and worry again, and then worry about our worry. Our supernatural option—to yield our concerns and our worry to Jesus, decidedly and consistently. “Consider the birds. They have no storerooms, no barns, but God feeds them. You can be free as the birds!” (See Luke 12:24.)

About My Eternal Life

“Every man by reason of his own weakness and defects, must be in fear and anxiety about his state of grace.” That was a declaration in the 16th century. How does it strike you? Tempted to believe it? Or, do you *disbelieve* it right now as you stand before God? Are you taking God as his word? “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” “God set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.” Yes, you have defects. But in Christ you are covered, secured. Praise the Lord!

About My Church

Why can’t churches be healthy and strong, all the time? It’s a bit like asking, Why can’t children be mature? Why can’t teens act like adults? Why can’t people live responsibly? Why can’t nations stop fighting? Churches have the Word of God, the blessing of Christ, the guidance of the Spirit. But people in churches are still people. All have been hurt by the world, and some have been hurt by the church. Even so, through the blessing of church thousands find healing. We have reason to be anxious about church. But even more reason *not* to be anxious. Christ is the church’s Head—its lover, its Saviour, its care-giver. In his eyes, his church is beautiful (Ephesians 5). How is it in your eyes?

The Beginning

An Excellent Future

Wars, disasters, disease, crime, grief and loss, financial distress. Are you anxious about the future? I invite you to grab your anxiety and carry it back into the past—to the very distant past. All the way back to the Beginning. “In the beginning God created” (Genesis 1:1). In this Beginning, you can have your anxiety recreated into meaning, purpose, peace. You did not come from nothing; you came from God. Your daily struggles do not amount to nothing; they are significant to God. Your present life will not end in nothing; it will go forward in God. “In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12:10). For an excellent future, go back to the Beginning!

Evidence for God

Huge sections of humanity do not believe in the Creation week described in Genesis. That story appears beyond credibility—infantile, primitive, irrational, unscientific. But consider the journey of science itself. Many findings and theories of years gone by look . . . well . . . they look infantile, primitive, irrational, and unscientific! We humans are a strange lot. We fix and declare our certainties even while we acknowledge the astounding Unknown. Genesis 1 is a declaration from the Unknown, shaped for Earth’s first century and its last. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” If this is wrong, all declarations may well be wrong; and life is established on nothing. If this is right, and I accept it as right, my life is built on God and becomes evidence for him.

Darkness to Light

“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Before God’s intervention, there was shapelessness, emptiness, darkness. But when the Spirit of God hovered in expectancy, life stirred! The Spirit of God still hovers over our planet. God is doing a work of re-creation. “Let there be light. . . . Let there be life!” Filled with the stirring Spirit, the Son of God strode onto our soil and declared, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness” (John 8:12). Today, will you find your form, your fullness and your light in the power of the creating Christ?

A Gift of Rest

Creation week ends not with a thunderous roar, but in breathtaking silence. It’s Earth’s Sabbath—the first, the original (Genesis 2:2, 3). God at rest. Earth at peace. Creation celebrated. Beings in intimacy. God with his children *present* in a sanctuary of time. This is Sabbath—divine family time. It’s when God’s kids turn their attention from the things that are made to the Maker of things. Today, Sabbath is the recurring reminder God gives believers that their story began in perfect rest, and that through Christ they discover perfect rest again (Hebrews 4:9, 10). If Sabbath was needed in the pure peace of Eden, it’s needed much more in the sin-ravaged commotion of our modern lives. What a gift!

Pure Victory

Claim Your Promise

As soon as there was creation, there was procreation. Adam and Eve received an amazing gift, an essence of the Creator himself. This gift was the capacity to be intimate; the ability to reproduce, to create again. What a God! And what a risk. As long as the gift inhaled the atmosphere of Heaven, it flourished. But when our first parents opened a window to the atmosphere of evil, the gift took on a new capacity—the sin of lust. But now consider this. God brought in a complete plan to restore men and women to the pure atmosphere of Heaven. “The blood of Jesus . . . purifies us from *all sin*” (1 John 1:7). The more deeply we’ve contaminated ourselves with sins of impurity, the more fully we can claim this incredible promise. Again, what a God!

Set Your Focus

The apostle John gathered all sins under three headings—impurity, selfishness, and pride (1 John 2:16). These three are interwoven. Impurity reeks of selfishness and bursts with pride. Impurity shifts my focus from others to *me*, from God to *me*. That’s why sexual sin is idolatry (Colossians 3:5). It’s self-worship. It’s every man’s battle, every woman’s struggle. And Jesus died for it. Our struggle may go on and on; but Christ goes even further. When we make our bed in hell, he’s there. He knows how we’re formed, remembers we’re “dust”. He’s slow to anger, compassionate. He forgives, purifies. We set our focus back on him—and in this choice, we find our victory. (See Psalms 103, 139.)

Clarify the Connection

“The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled” (1 Peter 4:7). The world we live in disagrees. Society promotes filthy minds and uncontrolled self-expression. If I don’t make a radical distinction, I’ll be poisoned, and the poison will devastate my eternal life. But check out the reason why Peter counsels clear minds and self-control—“so that you can pray”. Here’s the key. Prayer connects us with God, and the connection must remain clear! Like nothing else, impurity stifles the signal, drops the call, distracts the conversation, limits the relationship. Want more self control? *Pray!* Want deeper, better prayer? *Practice self-control!* You cannot do this. But God can, and he will.

Go to the Place of Peace

“The flesh” and “the spirit”. It’s an important contrast in the Bible. The spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. The flesh and the spirit are in a war with each other. Believers choose to live by the Spirit, not by their flesh. The flesh is the natural, sin-cursed nature in each of us, and it’s acutely demonstrated in sins of impurity. Pornography is a particular curse. Pornography is not merely the absence of light—it’s an invited darkness. In this struggle and every struggle, we have a place where we can find peace and strength. Paul cries, “Wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?” In a moment, he finds his answer: “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (see Romans 7:14–8:11).

Gift of Health

Opportunity Now

For health fanatics, here's a reality check—the ultimate mortality rate remains steady at 100 per cent. Then there's a defiant mystery—those occasional 100-year-olds who, when asked to what they attribute their longevity, say something like “A whiskey a day and a good cigar.” Even so, it's our Christian privilege to live better and longer in general than those who neglect or abuse their health. Research confirms that a plant-based diet, coupled with good overall health practices and active faith in God, significantly reduces the likelihood of some diseases, and can add up to 10 years to the life span. “Long life to you! Good health to you and your household!” (1 Samuel 25:6). This is not merely an ancient greeting—it's an opportunity right now for you and for me. Let's take it!

Chosen Destiny

Good and bad happens to the good and to the bad. It's life. But in the arena of personal health, don't be fooled. Health destiny—to a very significant extent—is yours to choose. Too often, people live like the devil; then when they're sick and dying, they blame the result on God. There's a better way. As early as possible in your life, consistently shape the life you would like to be living when you're 60 or 70. Good habits of general living, eating, exercising, sleeping, and trusting God are an investment account that pays generously in every decade of your life. “Friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 John 2).

Time to Trade

We're confronted with two conflicting views on our own bodies. Society's view: It's your body—do whatever you want with it. God's view: “Your body is a temple. . . . You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.) I can script my life on society's view, or on God's view. Why is this a difficult decision? It's like parents who say to their graduating teenager, “We're giving you the choice of a car. A rusted wreck or a new BMW—which will it be?” The privilege gets better. Even if you've gone with the rusted wreck, you can now trade it for a BMW. God offers a new creation—the old has gone, the new has arrived (2 Corinthians 5:17).

A Final Plan

Those of us who've lost our health at least temporarily know what a priceless gift health is. In normal life, physical health lies at the foundation of our work, our goals, our social lives. And, it's intimately connected with our emotional and spiritual well-being. Yet, the majority of adults whom I know well have a disease of some kind—myself included. God help us! He will, he has, he does. Christ bears our diseases, heals our illnesses, comforts us in our troubles. Even in our valley of the shadow of death, he's there. (Psalm 23:4; 103:3; 119:50; Isaiah 53:4, 5; Matthew 4:24.) He has a final plan—to give us totally new bodies, a great new start (1 Corinthians 15:51–55). Let's sign up for that health plan!

Sins of the Church

Pride of Position

Sins of the church—an uncomfortable subject! But the Bible brims with it. Here's one sin: Pride of position. "How do you expect to get anywhere with God when you spend all your time jockeying for position with each other, ranking your rivals and ignoring God?" (John 5:44, *The Message*). It's the human way—jostling for a more prominent role, coveting influence, manoeuvring to get attention, and becoming upset when others don't give us the credit we crave. Against all this is the picture of Christ on the Cross—the Lord himself taking on the lowest position of all, and from that position appealing to us, "Submit to each other as I submit myself to you; love one another as I love you."

Keeping Score

This could be the first sin we get into and last sin we get out of. We hardly know what it means, or what it is! Church leaders in Jesus' time kept count of the baptisms performed by John, versus the baptisms performed by Jesus' disciples—creating rivals in the eyes of the people (see John 4:1–2, *The Message*). King David paid a steeper penalty for his sin of counting his people, than he did for his sin of adultery and murder. In our rush to explain what this sin is *not*, we dismiss our calling to come to grips with what it *is*. Here's the crux of it: David replaced trust with statistics (2 Samuel 24:10, *The Message*). God's method is *faith*—focused reliance, leaving results entirely with Heaven. Any distraction from this method is sin (Romans 14:23). God help us on this one! And he will.

Rule Intoxication

Church leaders wouldn't enter the governor's palace because it would have disqualified them from keeping Passover (John 18:28). Delusional from their intoxication with rules, leaders continued their plot to put the Passover himself to death. This is the nature of legalism. It undermined Jesus and Paul, and it makes for a cracked and brittle platform in many congregations today. Paul resolved, "I'm not going to walk around on eggshells worrying about what small-minded people might say; I'm going to stride free and easy, knowing what our large-minded Master has already said" (1 Corinthians 10:29, *The Message*). Here's safety—the Master's word, which brings strident joy to those who hear.

Expert Fascination

It's a good thing for the church to be challenged and informed. It beats lethargy and ignorance, every time. But on the other side there is danger of fascination with "the fashionable wisdom of high-priced experts that will be out-of-date in a year or so" (1 Corinthians 2:6, *The Message*). True education goes highest when it goes deepest into the timeless Word. Chatter and committees must stop so that prayer can start. Research and plans must end so the battle for souls can commence. Ancient tribes tell the story. Reuben searched and talked. Gilead, Dan and Asher stayed safe and busy. But Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali—these risked life and limb in the battle itself (Judges 5). Will you do the same?

Gift of Pastors

The Shepherd

When Christ wrapped up his personal ministry on Earth, he continued his mission through a variety of gifted people—apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, and pastors (Ephesians 4:11). At first glance it appears there's only this one use of "pastor" in the New Testament. But a closer look shows the word is used 17 more times, including several times to describe Christ himself—as the Shepherd. "Shepherd" and "pastor". It's the same Greek word, reflecting scores of references in the Old Testament. The verbs tell the story. Shepherd-pastors lead, protect, tend, rule, carry, guide, watch over, feed, search for, look after, rescue, heal, and strengthen. In the first place, this is the work of God our Master Shepherd. But what a privilege to have pastors who join this critical work of God.

The Call

Some leadership gurus don't like the shepherd-pastor model for pastoring. "Too soft. Too traditional. Pastors today need to be more like a general or a CEO." The intention is good. Church members should not expect a pastor to wait upon their every need—members themselves are called into self-sacrificing service. But the shepherd-pastor model is given by God and dominant in Scripture. It's an unpretentious, demanding call. Shepherds don't drive to the office; they live in a tent alongside their sheep. Shepherds don't coerce the sheep; they know them by name and lead them out to good pastures. Christ identified himself as our Shepherd; it's an honour to follow humbly in his steps.

The Challenge

It's true—disorganisation and inability are sometimes evident among pastors. On the other hand, research shows people expect pastors to perform with excellence in far more areas than any other leaders in business, government, education, or non-profit work. These unrealistic expectations are a set-up for discouragement and failure. No wonder God gives straight counsel for church members: "Be responsive to your pastoral leaders. Listen to their counsel. They are alert to the condition of your lives and work under the strict supervision of God. Contribute to the joy of their leadership, not its drudgery. Why would you want to make things harder for them?" (Hebrews 13:17, The Message.)

The Need

Here's something alarming—discouragement, depression and divorce are prevalent among pastors. But here's something hopeful—you and I can drive back the devil through prayer. Pray for pastors to put their trust in the Spirit and the Word. Pray for them to be able to focus on their three highest tasks—praying, ministering Scripture, and giving spiritual direction. Pray they will not be consumed with schedules and committees. Pray they will be neither elated by apparent success nor disheartened by apparent failure. Pray for their courage to lead. Pray for their spouses and children. Then put your prayers into love-filled action as fellow disciples in Christ.