

## A BIBLICAL CALL TO PASTORAL VIGILANCE<sup>1</sup>

Richard L. Mayhue  
Senior Vice President and Dean  
Professor of Theology and Pastoral Ministry

*Guarding Christ's flock of believers from spiritual danger remains one of the most neglected pastoral duties in today's church. In addition to commissioning spiritual sentinels to watch over His flock by directing them into truth and righteousness, God has charged these sentinels to protect the flock from doctrinal error and personal sin. Ezekiel 3, 33 and Acts 20 provide clear instruction on the "why's" and "how's" of being a "pastoral watchman." Christ's shepherding example and pastoral exhortations through church history urge today's shepherds to undertake their watchman responsibilities faithfully. Undershepherds of the flock will be good servants and obedient imitators of the Chief Shepherd when they regularly watch for and warn of encroaching spiritual dangers.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"Re-engineering the Church" represented the theme of a recent pastoral leadership conference on how to prepare the church for the twenty-first century. While reading the conference brochure, I responded, "Why re-engineer the church when God designed it perfectly in the beginning? Shouldn't we inspect the church first and demolish only the portions that don't meet God's building code? That

---

<sup>1</sup>This essay has been adapted from the author's chapter "Watching and Warning" in *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr. (Dallas: Word, 1995) 336-50.

way, we can rebuild the defective portions according to the Builder's original plan. Who can improve on God's engineering?"

Obviously, the solution to the problems faced by the church is not *re-engineering*, but rather *restoration* to the perfect original specifications of the divine designer. The goal of change should be a return to the church's biblical roots in hope that she will regain her former glory.

An inspection of the existing church for possible rebuilding/remodeling should include the following types of questions: Have the builders/remodelers consulted the *Owner* (1 Cor 3:9)? Are they dealing with the *original Builder* (Matt 16:18)? Does the church still rest on the *beginning foundation* (1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:20)? Is the *first Cornerstone* still in place (Eph 2:20; 1 Pet 2:4-8)? Are the workers using *approved building materials* (1 Pet 2:5)? Do they employ the right *laborers* (1 Cor 3:9)? Have they utilized the appropriate *supervisors* (Eph 4:11-13)? Are the initial *standards of quality control* still in place (Eph 4:13-16)? Are the builders continuing to work from the *original blueprint* (2 Tim 3:16-17)?

The biblical approach to keeping the church from deteriorating during the next century requires that the role of the *construction supervisors* be one of the first areas for review. With the church pictured as a building, the *supervisors* are none other than the *shepherds* of the flock, according to another biblical metaphor. The remainder of this discussion will use the latter terminology.<sup>2</sup>

Paul laid out the basic task of a shepherd with these words:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as *pastors and teachers*, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head,

---

<sup>2</sup>See Earl D. Radmacher, *What the Church Is All About: A Biblical and Historical Study* (Chicago: Moody, 1978) 298-307, for a succinct study of the picture of the church as a flock of sheep.

even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love (Eph 4:11-16, emphasis added).

### THE TRUE SHEPHERD

Scripture continually alerts its readers to watch for spiritual counterfeits.<sup>3</sup> Jesus warned of "false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt 7:15). Elsewhere He characterizes the false shepherd as "a thief and robber" (John 10:1, 8).

Nowhere in Scripture is this more apparent than in the OT prophets who incessantly warned Israel about false prophets, even rebuking the nation when they strayed by following a false leader rather than a true one.<sup>4</sup> Though not as historically dramatic as the Old, frequently the NT also warns against deceiving, misleading spiritual leaders.<sup>5</sup> Every succeeding generation of history has proven the need for this caution. It remains a preeminent concern of God that true shepherds lead the church out of danger. One of the authenticating marks of a true shepherd lies in the ministry of watching and warning.

In the 1891 Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching at Yale, James Stalker insightfully cautioned, "The higher the honor attaching to the ministerial profession, when it is worthily filled, the deeper is the abuse of which it is capable in comparison with other callings. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the genuine attracts the uninvited clever imitation.

---

<sup>3</sup>The NT frequently exposes the false (Ceydhw) such as with (1) false apostles (2 Cor 11:13), (2) false brethren (2 Cor 11:26; Gal 2:4), (3) false christs (Matt 24:24), (4) false prophets (Matt 24:11; 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1), (5) false teachers (2 Pet 2:1), and (6) false witnesses (Matt 26:60; Acts 6:13).

<sup>4</sup>For example, see Jeremiah 14, 23; Ezekiel 13, 34; Micah 3; Zechariah 11.

<sup>5</sup>For example, see Matthew 23; 2 Corinthians 11; 2 Timothy 3—4; Titus 1; 2 Peter 2; 1 John 4; 2 John 8-11; Jude; Revelation 2—3.

<sup>6</sup>James Stalker, *The Preacher and His Models* (New York: George H. Doran, 1891) 128.

Realistically, the true shepherd must protect the flock from the spurious. Shepherds have explicit instructions from Scripture to warn that both overt and covert spiritual dangers continually threaten the pure life of the church because not everyone who claims to be a true shepherd is speaking the truth.

Charles Jefferson, in his classic work *The Minister As Shepherd*, lists seven basic functions of the genuine shepherd:

1. to love the sheep
2. to feed the sheep
3. to rescue the sheep
4. to attend and comfort the sheep
5. to guide the sheep
6. to guard and protect the sheep
7. to watch over the sheep.<sup>7</sup>

This essay treats Jefferson's last two categories in particular—guarding and watching over the sheep. No other aspect of contemporary pastoral ministry has fallen into disuse more than the life-saving role of a "watchman." For effective ministry to take place, the recovering of that aspect of shepherdly vigilance which guards and protects the flock from preventable spiritual carnage is vital. The true pastor will make the safety of Christ's flock a top priority. In so doing, he will also help rid the pastoral ranks of pollution brought by unauthorized look-alikes.

### **OVERSEEING THE FLOCK**

Each of the biblical terms for "pastor," "elder," and "overseer" describes facets of the shepherd's role. All three appear together in Acts 20:17, 28 and 1 Pet 5:1-2. "Elder" and "overseer" link up in Tit 1:5, 7 while both "overseer" and "shepherd" describe Christ in 1 Pet 2:25. Because of its relevance to the present discussion, "overseer" will be the center of attention in the following treatment.

Thomas Oden in a brief word captures the particular

---

<sup>7</sup>Charles Jefferson, *The Minister As Shepherd* (reprint, Hong Kong: Living Books, 1973) 39-66. See also John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1991) 169-76.

characteristic of "watchfulness" inherent in the term "overseer":

Bishop translates *episkopos*, which is derived from the family of Greek words referring to guardianship, oversight, inspection—accountably looking after a complex process in a comprehensive sense. *Episkopos* implies vigilance far more than hierarchy.<sup>8</sup>

A shepherd's *oversight* of the flock expresses itself broadly in two ways.<sup>9</sup> They do so, first, by providing truthful, positive direction and leadership to the flock. Second, they warn of spiritual dangers such as sin, false teaching and teachers, including Satan's assaults against the saints. The warning ministry also entails rescuing stray sheep.

On one hand, the shepherd teaches truth, and on the other, warns of sin and refutes doctrinal error. In leading the flock down the path of righteousness, the shepherd also watches for, warns, and even rescues the wandering sheep whom false teaching and alluring sin have enticed. When shepherds exercise their oversight responsibly, they will have both a preventative and a confrontive side to their ministry. One cannot shepherd the flock with credibility in the sight of God unless he provides a corrective oversight of watching and warning.

### **SPIRITUAL SENTINELS**

Any godly shepherd at the end of his ministry would like to be able to say with Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). Who would not want to hear the Lord's commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

---

<sup>8</sup>Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper, 1983) 71.

<sup>9</sup>Pastoral oversight of others assumes that the shepherd has first exercised his own "self-watch" of which C. H. Spurgeon writes in *Lectures to My Students*, first series (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 1-17. More recently John Stott has observed, "Only if pastors first guard themselves, will they be able to guard the sheep. Only if pastors first tend their own spiritual life, will they be able to tend the flock of God" ("Ideals of Pastoral Ministry," *BSac* 146/581 (January-March 1989):11.

Paul told the Ephesian elders, "I am innocent of the blood of all men" (Acts 20:26). Using the imagery of Ezek 3:18, 20—" . . . his blood I will require at your hand"—the apostle testified that he had delivered God's Word to both the lost and the saints. When unbelievers died in their sins, Paul had no pastoral blame since he fully discharged his duty of preaching the gospel (20:21). If believers strayed and engaged in prolonged patterns of sin, it was not because Paul failed to communicate the whole purpose of God (20:27).

If today's shepherds desire to finish their ministry like Paul, then they must not only be *approved workmen* (2 Tim 2:15), but also *unashamed watchmen*. The theme of "pastoral watchman" strikingly stands out in Ezek 3:16-21; 33:1-9. Later, Paul appropriately employed the same language to describe his ministry (Acts 20:17-31).

### ***Ezekiel 3 and 33***

God spoke to Ezekiel, "Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me" (Ezek 3:17; cf. 2:7). The prophet then spoke to both the wicked (3:18-19) and the righteous (3:20-21).

Ezekiel 33:1-6 relates the duties of a military watchman to those of a shepherd. Watchmen attentively manned their post in order to warn the city of approaching danger and deliver the citizens from harm. If watchmen diligently discharged their duty, regardless of the outcome, they would be blameless (33:2-5). However, if a watchman failed to alert the city to danger, blame for the resultant destruction fell on him, as if he were the enemy and had personally attacked the city (33:6).

Twentieth-century pastoring provides appropriate parallels. The shepherd is to stand watch over the flock as the watchman did over the city. God's warnings apply to both unbelieving sheep outside the flock and believing sheep within the flock. To the degree that pastors faithfully deliver God's Word, regardless of the results, they will receive divine commendation. But where the shepherd neglects the duties of his post, God will hold him accountable for failing to signal coming danger and judgment.

In a life-and-death situation, He must alertly tend the flock like a vigilant watchman protects his city. Oden captures the pastoral analogy:

The image of pastor as watchman, or protective, vigilant all-night guard, was already well developed by the Hebrew prophets. Radical accountability to God was the central feature of this analogy, as dramatically stated by Ezekiel: "The word of the Lord came to me: . . . I have made you a watchman for the Israelites. . . . It may be that a righteous man turns away and does wrong. . . . I will hold you answerable for his death" (Ezek. 3:16-21). Such injunctions for prophetic accountability have often been transferred by analogy to the Christian office of elder.

Listen to the analogy: The watchman over a city is responsible for the whole city, not just one street of it. If the watchman sleeps through an attack, the whole resultant damage is his responsibility. This was the covenantal analogy later applied repeatedly to the pastor, who was charged with nothing less than caring for the souls of an analogous small city, the *ekklesia*. If the congregation falls prey to seductive teaching or forgetfulness, whose responsibility can it be but that of the presbuteros, the guiding elder?<sup>10</sup>

### **Acts 20:17-31**

Paul's address to the elders of the Ephesian church comprises the most explicit and complete instruction on spiritual leadership given to a NT church. He relies heavily on the imagery and ideas of Ezekiel 3 and 33 from which the watchman theme extended itself far beyond Ezekiel's personal ministry.<sup>11</sup> Not only did Paul serve as a vigilant sentinel, but he commanded the elders of Ephesus to do likewise.

---

<sup>10</sup>Oden, *Pastoral Theology* 70. Great church reformers of the past like John Knox (*The First Blast of the Trumpet*, in *On Rebellion*, ed. Roger A. Mason [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994] 7-8) and Martin Luther (*Luther's Works*, vol. 39, ed. Eric W. Gritch [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957] 249-50) clearly sensed the watchman analogy in Ezekiel 3, 33, a factor that strongly influenced their ministries.

<sup>11</sup>See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, in NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 415; Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody, 1969) 29; Everett F. Harrison, *Acts* (Chicago: Moody, 1975) 315; Evald Lövestam, "Paul's Address at Miletus," *Studia Theologica* 41 (1987):1-10; Walter R. Roehrs, "Watchmen in Israel: Pastoral Guidelines from Ezekiel 1—3," *Concordia Journal* 16/1 (January 1990):6-17; Stott, "Ideals of Pastoral Ministry" 6-7.

At least five features attest to the close parallel between Ezekiel 3, 33 and Acts 20. First, both Ezekiel and the Ephesian elders were appointed by God. "I have appointed you a watchman . . ." (Ezek 3:16). ". . . The Holy Spirit has made you overseers . . ." (Acts 20:28). The commission in both instances resulted from God's direct call to ministry.

Second, the task assigned to both essentially involved vigilant oversight. The Hebrew **חֹשֶׁבֶת** (*sôpeh*), translated "watchman" in Ezek 3:16, is rendered  $\sigma\kappa\omicron\upsilon\pi\omega$  (*skopos*) in the Greek LXX version.<sup>12</sup> Compare this to  $\epsilon\pi\iota\sigma\kappa\omicron\upsilon\pi\omega$  (*episkopos*), translated "overseer," in Acts 20:28.<sup>13</sup> Both prophet and shepherd were accountable to God as a spiritual sentry responsible to warn of impending danger. Paul warned the Ephesian elders,

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears (Acts 20:28-31).

Third, in both passages the watchman is assigned to deliver God's Word as His warning. What proved true of Ezekiel (2:7, 3:17, 33:7), also marked Paul's ministry (Acts 20:20-21, 27). They both delivered the Word of God without compromise. That is why the apostle commended the elders to the Word of God's grace which

---

<sup>12</sup>A watchman is "fully aware of a situation in order to gain some advantage or keep from being surprised by the enemy" (*The Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. R. Laird Harris, et al. (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 773). "Watchman" is used in a true military sense in 1 Sam 14:16; 2 Sam 18:24; 2 Kgs 9:17-20; Isa 21:6. Watching in a spiritual sense also appears in Jer 6:17; Hab 2:1.

<sup>13</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries on Ezekiel*, vol. 1 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 148-49, commented, "For we know that the word Bishop means the same as watchman." The related verb  $\sigma\kappa\omicron\upsilon\pi\omega$  (*skopeo*) is used in the NT of watching both for the positive (Phil 3:17) and for the dangerous (Rom 16:17).

would be their message likewise (Acts 20:32).

Fourth, the watchman had a word for both the unrighteous (Ezek 3:18-19; 33:8-9) and the righteous (Ezek 3:20-21). Paul preached repentance to both Jew and Gentile (Acts 20:21) and the whole purpose of God to the church (Acts 20:20, 27). This twofold responsibility to reach the lost with the gospel and to watch over the saints continues to the present.

Fifth, both Ezekiel and Paul considered their "watchman, oversight" duties to be issues of highest importance—a matter of life and death. When Ezekiel carried out his task, regardless of the outcome, he had delivered himself from any spiritual liability (3:19, 21). On the other hand, if he failed to sound the warning, God promised, ". . . His blood will I require at your hand" (3:18, 20; 33:8). Paul reported, "I am innocent of the blood of all men (Acts 20:26).

The concept of "blood being on your head or hands" originated in Gen 9:5-6, a passage that articulates the judicial principle of capital punishment. This idea finds application in three categories of life.

1. Actual death, whether intentional (Josh 2:19, 1 Kgs 2:33; Matt 27:25; Acts 5:28) or accidental (Exod 22:2; Deut 22:8).
2. Heinous crimes not involving death but deserving of death as punishment (Lev 20:9, 11-13, 16, 27).
3. Spiritual matters of life and death proportion (Ezek 3:18, 20; 33:4, 6, 8; Acts 18:6; 20:26).

When the shepherd's responsibility as taught in Ezekiel 3, 33 and Acts 20, arrests a pastor's attention, it will give increased understanding of why Paul exclaimed, "For woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor 9:16). The apostle fully understood the serious responsibility given him by God as a preacher of the gospel. He would incur the displeasure of God should he do anything less. Watching and warning represent required duties in preaching the gospel, not optional tasks or those left to a specialist.

Ezekiel and Paul also shed light on Heb 13:17. Here the biblical writer succinctly cites the implication of being a faithful overseer, one who watches over the flock and who will one day give an account for his labors: "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you." Pastors will stand accountable before God to watch over and

warn the flock on spiritual matters. Vigilance plays a vital part in the ministry entrusted by God to His pastoral servants.

### THE CHIEF SHEPHERD'S WATCHFULNESS

Nowhere in Scripture is the vigilance of which Ezekiel and Paul teach more evident than in the gospel ministry of the Chief Shepherd—Jesus Christ. Whether one examines the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7), His discourse on the parables (Matthew 13), or the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24—25), the fact is indisputable that Jesus continually warned His disciples and the crowds about false teachers, unsound doctrine, and/or ungodly living. Jesus prominently practiced watchfulness in His first-advent ministry.

Christ's post-resurrection letters to seven churches illustrate His spiritual concerns most clearly (Revelation 2—3).<sup>14</sup> The certainty that He watched over them becomes evident in the phrase "I know" which appears in each of the seven letters (cf. 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). His eyes like a flame of fire (1:14) portray the omniscient vigilance of Christ over His church.

Watchfulness presumes a personal presence which Christ had promised the disciples. "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Revelation 1:13 pictures Christ standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands which represent seven churches (cf. 1:20). What was true of Christ and these first-century churches remains true to this very hour. As the Lord of His churches shepherded, so should the present generation of under-shepherds.

Christ commented in two different ways on what He observed in the churches: by commendation and by condemnation. Because He watched, He could warn. For example, He warned the Ephesian church that she had lost her first love (2:4-5). The church at Pergamum heard about Christ's distaste for compromise, especially as represented by the Balaamites (2:14) and the Nicolaitans (2:15). Jezebel and her consorts in Thyatira did not escape Christ's watchful eye and public

---

<sup>14</sup>For a fuller discussion consult Richard Mayhue, *What Would Jesus Say About Your Church?* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1995); cf. also Steven J. Lawson, *Final Call* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994).

rebuke (2:20-23). The Savior put Sardis on notice that she appeared to be a lifeless church (3:1) and confronted Laodicea over her exceeding sinfulness (3:15-18). Since Christ concluded, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline . . ." (3:19), so contemporary shepherds should follow His lead in watching and warning.

While the modern shepherd does not possess Christ's divine attribute of omniscience, he has been given the revealed mind of Christ in Scripture (1 Cor 2:16). Sound doctrine, both in regard to belief and behavior, represents the eyes of Christ through which today's pastors can see and assess the spiritual landscape in order to watch and appropriately warn effectively (cf. Gal 2:11-21; 1 Tim 4:6; 2 Tim 1:3; 4:2; Titus 1:9, 2:1).

Christ commanded the disciples to teach obedience to all that He commanded them (Matt 28:20). Paul ministered to the Ephesian elders by proclaiming the whole will of God (Acts 20:27). The angel commanded the apostles to speak "the full message of this new life" (Acts 5:20). Paul instructed Timothy to pass the apostolic teachings on to the next generation (2 Tim 2:2). Christ commended the Ephesian church for taking doctrine seriously (Rev 2:2, 6). The only adequate approach to biblical truth in these instances is to take the implied responsibility seriously.<sup>15</sup>

Imagine what the forsaking of divine truth would entail. On what basis would one recognize and reject false teachers (Rom 16:17; 2 John 9-10) or identify and refute false doctrine (Titus 1:9)? How would believers know what is true and worth holding on to (1 Tim 3:9; Rev 2:24)? How would Christians distinguish between right and wrong? How would sin be confronted and corrected? Obviously, the prevention of this kind of spiritual disaster is the ultimate priority. Twentieth-century shepherds, like their pastoral predecessors, must earnestly watch over the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Historically, indifference to Christian doctrine has produced heretics, but attention to revealed truth has crowned heroes of the faith and resulted in spiritually healthy flocks like those at Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11) and Philadelphia (Rev 3:7-13).

---

<sup>15</sup>See Richard Mayhue, "Why We Need Doctrine," *Moody Monthly* 96/5 (January-February 1996):16-17, for a more complete discussion of "sound doctrine."

Several current events, like the "Toronto Experience" for example, illustrate the need for a watching and warning ministry. How does one know that the convulsive laughter, hysterics, and other bizarre behavior is actually of God? How can anyone distinguish this from other similar experiences outside of Christianity? Even leaders, otherwise sympathetic, have hesitated to endorse these experiences without a biblical basis for them.<sup>16</sup> Unless a standard of truth exists—i.e., doctrine—to help us discern the authentic from the counterfeit, the evangelical community will be prone to wander like sheep easily led astray.

Consider the sixth promise of a prominent ministry to men which encourages "reaching beyond denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity." Though the goal of oneness is laudable and the realization of some spiritual good is undisputed, no real unity is worth the sacrificing of biblical truth. This movement brings the barriers down so low and reaches out so far, doctrinally speaking, that Roman Catholic and Mormon officials expressed strong interest in this ministry at a recent Los Angeles rally.<sup>17</sup> When doctrinal barriers become non-apparent, Christians have the right to question, "What makes this ministry uniquely Christian?"

An unofficial document signed by prominent evangelicals and Roman Catholics (*Evangelicals and Catholics Together*) seemingly distorts the true gospel that salvation is by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone without human merit.<sup>18</sup> This accord reportedly appeared in order to establish common ground for mutual ministry such as opposing abortion, homosexuality, and pornography. But what is the gain in relinquishing the true gospel as provided by

---

<sup>16</sup>See James A. Beverly, "Vineyard Severs Ties with 'Toronto Blessing' Church," *CT* 40:1 (January 8, 1996):66, who reported that John Wimber of the Vineyard Association of Churches is ". . . unable because of my own scriptural and theological convictions to any longer give an answer for, or defend the way, this particular move is being pastored and/or explained."

<sup>17</sup>As reported by John Dart "'Promise Keepers,' a Message to L.A. Men," *Los Angeles Times* (Saturday, May 6, 1995):B12-13.

<sup>18</sup>For a lucid analysis of this document, see John F. MacArthur, *Reckless Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994) 119-52.

Christ and reclaimed by the Reformation? To pay such a great price as possibly compromising the gospel to gain ministry cooperation is unthinkable. "Anathema," shouts Paul who opposed these social/spiritual blights, but never stopped offering the true gospel and opposing the false (Gal 1:8-9).

### PASTORAL CONCERNS FOR VIGILANCE

American patriot Thomas Jefferson observed that "eternal vigilance is the price of victory."<sup>19</sup> Although he spoke of political victory, watchfulness is even more true for the church if she is to win out over false teaching and sin. W. Phillip Keller warned of *Predators in Our Pulpits* through his recent call to restore true, biblical preaching to churches around the world.<sup>20</sup> "Predator" might sound harsh, but it nonetheless follows the example of Christ who rightfully called the Pharisees blind guides, serpents, and whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23). God's spiritual sentry must be forthright in his challenges and strongly confront those who would maliciously usurp the true shepherd's tasks, thereby leading Christ's flock astray.

The Shepherd of Psalm 23 comforted the sheep with His rod and staff.<sup>21</sup> These implements not only symbolize vigilance, but in the Shepherd's hand they are also instruments of protection and direction, which are the fruit of vigilance. The "rod" protected the flock against immediate, encroaching danger. The "staff" served to assemble the sheep, to guide them, and even to rescue them should they wander away. Likewise, the shepherd of Christ's flock—the church—must be vigilant. The spiritual health and integrity of the flock depend on his devotion to this phase of his responsibility.

In his day, Charles Jefferson memorably captured the protective aspect of an ancient Near Eastern shepherd's duty. The parallels to

---

<sup>19</sup>John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations* (reprint, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1982) 397.

<sup>20</sup>W. Phillip Keller, *Predators In Our Pulpits* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1988).

<sup>21</sup>For a vivid description of the shepherds' rod and staff, see W. Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 92-103.

modern-day shepherding for pastors are obvious, but unfortunately all too often ignored.

The Eastern shepherd was, first of all, a watchman. He had a watch tower. It was his business to keep a wide-open eye, constantly searching the horizon for the possible approach of foes. He was bound to be circumspect and attentive. Vigilance was a cardinal virtue. An alert wakefulness was for him a necessity. He could not indulge in fits of drowsiness, for the foe was always near. Only by his alertness could the enemy be circumvented. There were many kinds of enemies, all of them terrible, each in a different way. At certain seasons of the year there were floods. Streams became quickly swollen and overflowed their banks. Swift action was necessary in order to escape destruction. There were enemies of a more subtle kind—animals, rapacious and treacherous: lions, bears, hyenas, jackals, wolves. There were enemies in the air; huge birds of prey were always soaring aloft ready to swoop down upon a lamb or kid. And then, most dangerous of all, were the human birds and beasts of prey—robbers, bandits, men who made a business of robbing sheepfolds and murdering shepherds. That Eastern world was full of perils. It teemed with forces hostile to the shepherd and his flock. When Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Habakkuk talk about shepherds, they call them watchmen set to warn and save.<sup>22</sup>

Without question, vigilance starts in the pulpit, but it goes far beyond. Watching over the flock as a body does not preclude watching over the congregation as individuals. Strong pulpit ministry has always been the backbone of shepherding, but it does not exhaust the shepherd's responsibilities. Consider the persuasion of Charles Bridges:

Let us not think that all our work is done in the study and in the pulpit. Preaching—the grand lever of the Ministry—derives much of its power from connection with the Pastoral work; and its too frequent disjunction from it is a main cause of our inefficiency. The Pastor and Preacher combine to form the completeness of the sacred office, as expounded in our Ordination services and Scriptural illustrations. How little can a stated appearance in public answer to the lowest sense of such terms as

---

<sup>22</sup>Jefferson, *The Minister* 41-42.

Shepherd, Watchman, Overseer, Steward!—terms, which import not a mere general superintendence over the flock, charge, or household, but an acquaintance with their individual wants, and a distribution suitable to the occasion; without which, instead of "taking heed to the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made us overseers," we can scarcely be said to "take the oversight of it" at all.<sup>23</sup>

Pastoral oversight includes a strong emphasis on watching carefully for lurking spiritual danger according to the follow sampling of NT exhortations:

"And He was giving orders to them saying, `Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod'" (Mark 8:15).

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets . . ." (Luke 20:46).

"Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision . . ." (Phil 3:2).

"Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8).

"Watch yourselves, that you might not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward" (2 John 8).

The early church took these biblical instructions seriously as the actions of both the Apostle John and his disciple Polycarp confirm:

The same Polycarp, coming to Rome under the episcopate of Anicetus, turned many from the aforesaid heretics to the church of God, proclaiming the one and only true faith, that he had received from the apostles, that, viz., which was delivered by the church. And there are those still living who heard him relate, that John the disciple of the Lord went into a bath at Ephesus, and seeing Cerinthus within, ran out

---

<sup>23</sup>Charles Bridges, *The Christian Minister* (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980) 343.

without bathing, and exclaimed, "Let us flee lest the bath should fall in, as long as Cerinthus, that enemy of truth, is within." And the same Polycarp, once coming and meeting Marcion, who said, "acknowledge us," he replied, "I acknowledge the first born of Satan." Such caution did the apostles and their disciples use, so as not even to have any communion, even in word with any of those that thus mutilated the truth, according to the declaration of Paul: "An heretical man after the first and second admonition avoid, knowing that such an one is perverse, and that he sins, bringing condemnation upon himself."<sup>24</sup>

The pattern continued to the fourth generation (Christ, John, and Polycarp being the first three) in the ministry of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp:

Inasmuch as certain men have set the truth aside, and bring in lying words and vain genealogies, which, as the apostle says, "minister questions rather than godly edifying which is in faith," and by means of their craftily-constructed plausibilities draw away the minds of the inexperienced and take them captive, [I have felt constrained, my dear friend, to compose the following treatise in order to expose and counteract their machinations.] These men falsify the oracles of God, and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation. They also overthrow the faith of many, by drawing them away, under a pretense of [superior] knowledge, from Him who founded and adorned the universe; as if, forsooth, they had something more excellent and sublime to reveal, than that God who created the heaven and the earth, and all things that are therein. By means of specious and plausible words, they cunningly allure the simple-minded to inquire into their system; but they nevertheless clumsily destroy them, while they initiate them into their blasphemous and impious opinions respecting the Demiurge; and these simple ones are unable, even in such a matter, to distinguish falsehood from truth.<sup>25</sup>

More recently—in the mid-1960's—Harry Blamires has written

---

<sup>24</sup>Eusebius Pamphilus, *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1955) 141-42.

<sup>25</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, vol. 2 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 315.

a significant volume warning the British church of its rapid departure from truth. He has since been associated with the concept of "thinking Christianly" because of his clear call for the restoration of a Christian mind-set based on Scripture:

Our culture is bedeviled by the it's-all-a-matter-of-opinion code. In the sphere of religious and moral thinking we are rapidly heading for a state of intellectual anarchy in which the difference between truth and falsehood will no longer be recognized. Indeed it would seem possible that the words *true* and *false* will eventually (and logically) be replaced by the words *likeable* and *dislikeable*. . . .

Christian truth is objective, four-square, unshakable. It is not built of men's opinions. It is not something fabricated either by scholars or by men in the street, still less something assembled from a million answers, Yes, No, and Don't know, obtained from a cross-section of the human race. Christian truth is something given, revealed, laid open to the eye of the patient, self-forgetful inquirer. You do not *make* the truth. You *reside* in the truth. A suitable image for truth would be that of a lighthouse lashed by the elemental fury of undisciplined error. Those who have come to reside in the truth must stay there. It is not their business to go back into error for the purpose of joining their drowning fellows with the pretense that, inside or outside, the conditions are pretty much the same. It is their duty to draw others within the shelter of the truth. For truth is most certainly a shelter. And it is inviolable. If we start to dismantle it and give it away in bits to those outside, there will be nothing left to protect our own heads—and no refuge in which to receive the others, should they at length grow weary of error.<sup>26</sup>

What Blamires wrote to the British church of the 60's, David Wells has more recently written to the American church of the 90's:

The stream of historic orthodoxy that once watered the evangelical soul is now damned by a worldliness that many fail to recognize as worldliness because of the cultural innocence with which it presents itself. To be sure, this orthodoxy never was infallible, nor was it without its blemishes and foibles, but I am far from persuaded that the

---

<sup>26</sup>Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (reprint, Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1978), 112-14.

emancipation from its theological core that much of evangelicalism is effecting has resulted in greater biblical fidelity. In fact, the result is just the opposite. We now have less biblical fidelity, less interest in truth, less seriousness, less depth, and less capacity to speak the Word of God to our own generation in a way that offers an alternative to what it already thinks. The older orthodoxy was driven by a passion for truth, and that was why it could express itself only in theological terms. The newer evangelicalism is not driven by the same passion for truth, and that is why it is often empty of theological interest.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps no pastor in America has made his point more frequently or forcefully in the past decade than John MacArthur who warns,

True discernment has suffered a horrible setback in the past few decades because reason itself has been under attack within the church. As Francis Schaeffer warned nearly thirty years ago in *The God Who Is There*, the church is following the irrationality of secular philosophy. Consequently, reckless faith has overrun the evangelical community. Many are discarding doctrine in favor of personal experience. Others say they are willing to disregard crucial biblical distinctives in order to achieve external unity among all professing Christians. True Christianity marked by intelligent, biblical faith seems to be declining even among the most conservative evangelicals.<sup>28</sup>

Blamires, Wells, and MacArthur stand in the long, unbroken chain of gallant men who have taken seriously the biblical injunctions to watch and warn. They serve as exemplars of shepherdly vigilance in the best tradition of the NT overseer.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 11-12.

<sup>28</sup>John F. MacArthur, *Reckless Faith* 19; cf. also MacArthur's *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993) and *The Vanishing Conscience* (Dallas: Word, 1994).

<sup>29</sup>Doctrinal error does not always appear in its most obvious or despicable form. "Error, indeed, is never set forth in its naked deformity, lest, being thus exposed, it should at once be detected. But it is craftily decked out in an attractive dress, so as, by its outward form, to make it appear to the inexperienced (ridiculous as the expression may seem) more true than the truth itself" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 315).

Paul wrote Titus that an overseer should hold "fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). To "exhort" only and not to "refute" amounts to spiritual insubordination, even gross disobedience. Certainly, it is nothing less than dereliction of duty.

John Stott recently exposed the growing negligence of late twentieth-century shepherds in their failure to watch for and confront doctrinal error:

This emphasis is unpopular today. It is frequently said that pastors must always be positive in their teaching, never negative. But those who say this have either not read the New Testament or, having read it, they disagree with it. For the Lord Jesus and His apostles gave the example and even set forth the obligation to be negative in refuting error. Is it possible that the neglect of this ministry is one of the major causes of theological confusion in the church today? To be sure, theological controversy is distasteful to sensitive spirits and has its spiritual dangers. Woe to those who enjoy it! But it cannot conscientiously be avoided. If, when false teaching arises, Christian leaders sit idly by and do nothing or turn tail and flee, they will earn the terrible epithet "hirelings" who care nothing for Christ's flock. Is it right to abandon His sheep and leave them defenseless against the wolves to be like "sheep without a shepherd"? Is it right to be content to see the flock scattered and individual sheep torn to pieces? Is it to be said of believers today, as it was of Israel, that "they were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field" (Ezek. 34:5)? Today even some of the fundamental doctrines of historic Christianity are being denied by some church leaders, including the infinite personality of the living God, the eternal deity, virgin birth, atoning death, bodily resurrection of Jesus, the Trinity, and the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone without any meritorious works. Pastors are to protect God's flock from error and seek to establish them in the truth.<sup>30</sup>

### **A GOOD SERVANT OF JESUS CHRIST**

"In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good

---

<sup>30</sup>Stott, "Ideals of Pastoral Ministry" 8.

servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following" (1 Tim 4:6). For the spiritual good of the Ephesian church, Paul insisted that Timothy point out "these things," referring back to the false doctrine exposed in 4:1-3 and truth taught in 4:4-5. "A good servant of Jesus Christ" points them out to the flock by way of warning and instruction.<sup>31</sup> Failure to warn invites a "spiritual Chernobyl" because real danger still exists even though the sheep are unaware. Ultimately, they will suffer harm through the negligence of a shepherd to sound a timely warning.

As a former naval officer, I have stood many four-hour watches on the bridge of a destroyer at sea. During the watch I had responsibility for the operation and safety of the ship. If a dangerous situation appeared, I had to warn both the captain and the crew. They depended on my alertness in carrying out my assigned task. Failure to function properly according to my charge would have amounted to gross negligence on my part, possible damage to the ship or loss of life, and the dishonorable end of my naval career. Just as "a good naval officer" warns when danger lurks nearby, so must "a good servant of Jesus Christ."

Be assured that it is good and right to protect the flock from false teachers, untrue doctrine, and personal sin, even when it involves exercising church discipline.<sup>32</sup> They will find comfort in your diligent protection (Ps 23:4). If you begin by preaching the whole of Scripture, then the process of watching and warning will begin to take place in the normal course of ministry because His saints receive warnings through the truth of God's Word (Ps 19:11).

Although Paul proved to be a courageous shepherd, he still harbored a few fears. This is one of them: "But I am afraid, lest as the

---

<sup>31</sup>Charles Haddon Spurgeon proved to be a classic watchman in the 19th century as illustrated in such writings as "How to Meet the Evils of the Age" and "The Evils of the Present Time" (in *An All-Round Ministry* [reprint, Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1983] 89-127, 282-314).

<sup>32</sup>For helpful material on "church discipline" as a means of dealing with and prayerfully restoring a sinning believer, see J. Carl Laney, *A Guide To Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985), and John MacArthur, Jr., *Matthew 16-23* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 123-39.

serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor 11:3).

Good servants of Jesus Christ would do well to share this fear with Paul, not as a sign of weakness or cowardice, but as a significant demonstration of spiritual strength coupled with a clear sense of spiritual reality. To do less would result in hollow ministry, invite Christ's displeasure with their service, and endanger the spiritual health of the flock. The blood of the flock would be on their hands. Because the flock is so susceptible to deception, shepherds must be ever vigilant.

Jesus Christ stands as the ultimate Shepherd and Guardian of people's souls (1 Pet 2:25). Today's undershepherds could do no better than to follow His example of watching and warning. Failure to measure up to His pattern would be biblically unthinkable and spiritually unconscionable.