

Generous Honour

(This extra chapter for “The book your pastor wishes you would read” by Christopher Ash is aimed specifically at anyone who has oversight for how much a pastor is paid and where they are housed. <https://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/the-book-your-pastor-wishes-you-would-read>)

Two of the senior members of the church were chatting to a young man. Ben was shortly to leave seminary and was looking for a pastoral position. “Come and join us here,” they said. “We are looking for a new pastor and we think you are just the man we need.” Ben was flattered by their interest. His wife Charis prompted him to ask about where they would live and whether the church could pay him. “Oh, don’t worry about that sort of thing!” they said reassuringly, with a comforting hand on the young man’s shoulder. “We’ll sort all that. We’ll deal with the practical things. You can trust us.”

He did trust them. But he would have done better not to. Their reassurance wasn’t worth the air through which the warm words travelled.

Grace Church has not much money and not so very many members. To be honest, they would rather have a volunteer pastor, or a semi-retired pastor whose family could support themselves. But when the new pastor came, they prayed and pledged generously. They rented a terraced house very similar to where most of the church members lived and paid a salary equivalent to a senior local teacher. The pastor, who had not asked for any of this, was frankly amazed at their generosity. He knew, in every fibre of his being, that they set a high store by having a faithful pastor.

“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,’ (quoting the Old Testament law in Deuteronomy 25 v 4) and ‘The worker deserves his wages’ (quoting Jesus in Luke 10 v 7).” 1 Timothy 5 v 17

Perhaps the most significant word the New Testament uses of the way we should treat our pastor is “honour”. We should honour them: in every way we are to demonstrate that we greatly value them for who they are and what they do. They are worthy of “double honour”—that is, emphatic, full-blooded honour. They deserve to be valued. There are at least four reasons for this.

First, we are to value them because they preach and teach to us the gospel of the Lord Jesus. It is the leaders “whose work is” (literally “who labour at”) “preaching and teaching” who are worthy of this double honour. They are like oxen labouring away at treading out the harvest grain (quoting from Deuteronomy 25 v 4); they deserve their wages. It is hard work, but the message they give us week by week is a word of incomparable value, a priceless treasure; we are so, so grateful to have them labour at it in prayer and in the study and then to serve it up to us with thoughtful explanation, pastoral insight, and urgent exhortation. Of course, if they do not labour at the word, if their preaching and teaching are shallow as a result of laziness or wrong priorities, we will not value them nearly as much—there is a flip side to this honour.

Second, we value them because of the depth and perceptiveness of their pastoral care for us. Paul tells the Christians in Thessalonica “to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5 v 12-13). Again, notice the “hard work”; we do not value the lazy pastor! But notice also their “care” for you, including admonishing you, warning, if necessary, rebuking as well as encouraging, speaking with us individually with the perceptiveness that can

only come from personal knowledge of us. That too is hard work and will drain them emotionally and relationally. But what a wonderful, valuable thing to have a pastor who will do this for us! We should value them very highly for their care.

Third, we value them because of the sacrifices they make. Writing about a fine Christian worker called Epaphroditus, Paul writes, “honour people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life...” (Philippians 2 v 29-30). Whatever the circumstances that made it so tough for Epaphroditus, clearly he was a man who paid a price for serving Jesus in the work of the gospel. Not all pastors are like this. Then, as now, some think “that godliness is a means to financial gain” (1 Timothy 6 v 5), perhaps even pursuing “dishonest gain” through the power they get by being a pastor (1 Peter 5 v 2). It is possible to covet the “silver or gold or clothing” that I may get hold of by being a pastor (Acts 20 v 33). In some cultures, becoming a church leader can indeed be a means to a more comfortable life; in others, there is less scope for that, and yet a pastor may succumb to coveting gain. We should not honour such men, but those like Epaphroditus, who make sacrifices for the gospel. Writing to the Corinthians about his right to be supported by the people to whom he brings the gospel, Paul yet insists that he will “put up with anything”—that is, any sacrifice—“rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9 v 12). Paradoxically, it is precisely the pastors who do not ask for, or expect honour, to whom we should give it generously!

Fourth, we are to honour them because the world will not. Following the pattern of the seventy-two disciples sent on mission in Luke chapter 10, pastors are sent out “like lambs among wolves” (v 3); there are plenty who will not receive their message; only the people whose hearts are softened to the message of the kingdom will welcome them (Luke 10 v 1-12). In many countries, when persecution comes, it is the pastors who are the first to be beaten up by the police and incarcerated in prison. Even in softer places, where there is not violent persecution, a pastor’s work will not be valued. Some of them have come from doing work the world values highly. When they were doctors, lawyers, or senior managers, they were treated with respect; now, when at a party they are asked what they do for a living, the moment they answer they sense their questioner beginning to look over their shoulder to see if there is someone more interesting to talk to. And it hurts. Unless we show our pastor that we greatly esteem them, no-one else will.

Practical honour

Honour shows itself in practical support. Secular employers show their esteem in simple practical ways—salary, housing, benefits, a car, and so on. That’s how someone knows how valuable they are to their employer. No matter how often my employer tells me how much they value me and my work, if they pay me a pittance and put me in a dank dark office, I will not believe them!

So here’s the paradox. If pastors stand on their rights, press for good pay and conditions, and insist on being treated with respect, we are wise to be cautious and not to give them too readily what they ask. But if they don’t—if, like Paul, they will “put up with anything” to bring us the gospel of Christ—then we will want to pour ourselves out in giving them generous honour. We want to demonstrate to them clearly and unambiguously that we value them. It is shameful to be mean to such pastors.

Practically, this means being very clear about what financial support we can give. No vague assurances, but a legal contract, and a clear and unambiguous commitment, so there is no possibility of our renegeing on it, and no danger of we or they misunderstanding it. I heard recently a shameful story of a church that, having given warm assurances, actually gave no financial support to a new pastor for six whole months.

We shall need to think carefully about what level of salary is appropriate. This is difficult, and the answer will vary depending on the church demographic. Perhaps there is a principle that can be

transferred from what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8 about churches giving and receiving. No, he says, I don't want you to be impoverished so that the other church can be stinking rich; but I do want there to be "equality" (2 Corinthians 8 v 12-13). Not, I take it, a precise mathematical equality, for that would not be possible, with the variations in financial circumstances of church members. But some kind of parity that acknowledges the value and level of work that the pastor does. One church I know keeps their pastor's remuneration level with that of the local primary school headteacher; it seems a sensible rule for them. But, whatever we do, we want the level of financial support to reflect the extent to which we value their work.

Honour also means thinking carefully about housing. Either we pay a sufficient salary for the pastor to begin to buy, or to rent, their own home; or we house them. In some areas, housing is so exorbitantly expensive (to buy or rent) that we will need to house our pastor if we want them to live amongst the people they are to serve; (alternatively we will need to pay them a very large salary!). If we house them, we must look after the house. I heard a shameful story of a church who refused to replace a disgustingly tatty carpet, in a condition the church members would never have dreamt of having in their own homes. Some churches or denominations look after ministry houses really well; others are penny-pinching in such a way that it shouts to the pastor, "We may say that we value you; but really we don't". Let's not be like that.

Practical honour includes a clear and fair arrangement for reimbursing ministry expenses. If the ministry home is used for church meetings or pastoral work, we will want to pay a generous proportion of bills such as electricity, gas, and phone. If a pastor needs a car they would otherwise not have needed, in order to do their pastoral work, we will want to provide a car or contribute generously to the mileage costs (not just fuel, but sufficient to contribute to servicing, repairs and depreciation).

An employer who truly values a worker will take care to ensure that their pension fund is being responsibly built up. We will want to make sure that we ensure, year by year, that they can build up a sufficient pension fund to provide for them if they live into old age.

In all this we must never lose sight of the reason for doing this: the labourer deserves his wages. It is a shameful meanness not to give practical honour in these ways. James warns unjust employers that "the wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you" (James 5 v 1-6). I sometimes wonder if that might be said of some churches. It is a sobering thought.

By contrast, it is a beautiful thing—and I have often experienced it—when churches gladly acknowledge just how valuable is the work of their pastor, and they show that value in thoughtful and practical honour. Such a pastor is surrounded by visible, practical, powerful signals that, yes, we really do value them and their pastoral leadership. Such honour may be just the motivation that keeps on getting them out of bed in the morning to persevere with faithful pastoring.

A prayer

Father God, thank you that by the Spirit of the Lord Jesus who did not please himself, you have given us so many pastors who give of themselves with glad self-sacrifice. For each one, may your name be praised as they walk in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus and work hard in prayer, labour at the word of God, and toil in pastoral care. Grant that we in our church, and I in my own discipleship, may give them the wholehearted honour that is their due. For Jesus' sake, Amen.