

Ron van der Spoel



The Pastors' Manual

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Introduction to The Pastors' Manual

This Pastors' Manual is the result of twenty years of experience as a senior pastor in churches in The Netherlands and over 10 years of teaching more than a thousand pastors in Africa, South-East Asia, and the Middle East. Most of these pastors live and work in the context of persecution and poverty. I did not only teach them; more than anything, I learned from them what it really means to follow Jesus.

When I travelled and met fellow pastors in their countries, I often remembered and quoted the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 1:11,12: "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong - that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith,"

Thinking and praying about how to teach and encourage pastors around the world, I felt the Holy Spirit pointing out to me the words that Jethro spoke to his son-in-law Moses. Moses was leading the people of Israel through the desert to the promised land. Jethro saw that Moses was in charge of this large group of people all by himself and that both Moses and the people were wearing themselves out. Then Jethro gave Moses five words of advice aimed at equipping him to lead the people of God safely and responsibly to their destiny. These five words of advice form the five parts of this Pastors' Manual.

Jethro said to Moses: "Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. (1) You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to Him. (2) Teach them the decrees and laws and (3) show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But (4) select capable men from all the people and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but (5) have them bring every difficult case to you" (Exodus 18:19-22).

These verses brought me to the structure of The Pastors' Manual, in which I changed the sequence a little bit for the sake of clarity.

The five sections of The Pastors' Manual are:

1. Take care of My sheep: the identity and role of the pastor
2. Passion for Preaching: preach the Word of God
3. Teach them to obey: teaching your people discipleship
4. Pastoral Care: how to deal with a wide variety of problems that you people face
5. Organising the church: what is church and how can you lead your church

My aim with this Pastors' Manual is not to present a complete or comprehensive practical theology. All this manual does is give some Biblical and practical insights in these five fields in which every pastor works. This means that the practical application in your specific culture, context and situation is your own responsibility as a pastor. My longing is that with the help of The Pastors' Manual you will be able to do so in a Biblical way.

I pray that The Pastors' Manual might be a blessing to many pastors who are called to serve God and His church in their part of the world.

Reverend Ron van der Spoel,

Amersfoort, The Netherlands,

Spring 2016

Part 1

Take care of my sheep

Part 1 : Take care of my sheep

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Introduction to Part 1

Take care of my sheep

This first part of The Pastors' Manual deals with what it means to be a pastor. Jethro's first advice to Moses is: *'you must be the people's representative before God'* (Exodus 18:19). The pastor is called to carry his congregation to God in prayer and at the same time represent God to the church. This is a special position, in which the pastor speaks on behalf of both the church and God. The pastor's entire life is marked by this responsibility. In this book we will look at how this ministry affects his spiritual life and his daily existence. We will also consider the task itself, typical pitfalls, and how to persevere as a pastor. While reading and studying this chapter, never forget the promise of our Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5:24: *"The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it"!*

The pastor as a shepherd

The best-known Biblical image of a spiritual leader is that of a shepherd. The Bible often speaks of shepherds. Abel was a shepherd. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were shepherds. Moses herded goats for 40 years. David was a full-fledged shepherd. Jesus called Himself 'the good shepherd'. Peter was referred to by Jesus as 'shepherd of the church'. And finally, in the epistles, those leading the church are also called shepherds. A pastor guides and nourishes the church the way a shepherd feeds his flock. So in order to discover Biblical guidelines for pastors, we must look at what a shepherd does.

The shepherd

I have often stood watching a shepherd as he slowly leads his large flock of sheep across the heathland. It looks pretty easy-going. He walks ahead of his sheep at an easy pace. When he reaches a patch of heath that needs grazing, he positions himself on higher ground, leaning on his staff. From a distance being a shepherd looks like an easy, undemanding job.

It wasn't until I once attended a 'shepherding demonstration' put on for the public by a shepherd and his dog —a real English Border Collie—that I began to understand how hard those two have to work to keep the flock together and to lead them to the right places. Their apparent serenity hides a constant watchfulness. The shepherd has to be on the alert all the time, scanning his animals and the surroundings. He has to keep an eye on the weather and the time of the sunset. He has to know which areas need grazing on a particular day and which don't, in order to effectively manage the vegetation in the longer term. He has to monitor the flock to know which sheep are strong and which are weaker, and which of the sheep are ready for lambing. He has to be able to see whether newborn lambs are going to make it on their own or need help. He has to provide sufficient water. Particularly in the lambing season, he lives with the flock night and day. He loves his sheep and will do anything for them. The sheep, in turn, know him and follow him, no matter where he leads them. Not that they all follow

spontaneously all the time – some wander off, others get hurt and occasionally there is trouble between flock members. But at the end of the day, the shepherd makes sure the whole flock safely gets back to the fold.

As I consider the work of a shepherd, the words of Psalm 23, the shepherd's psalm, come to mind. The amazing thing about this Psalm is that it is a song about God's shepherding qualities: 'The LORD is my shepherd.' David knew exactly what he was singing about. Shepherding was in his blood. As a seasoned shepherd praising the shepherdry of his Lord, he powerfully summarises what God the Shepherd does for him: 'I lack nothing.' This neatly sums up what a shepherd is supposed to do: make sure the sheep lack nothing. Next, David considers rest and receiving what one needs, as he sings in verse 2: 'He makes me lie down in green pastures.' God the Shepherd supplies new strength and spiritual nourishment. In His presence, the psalmist asserts, goodness and love will always abound.

Giving rest

These things are what shepherding is all about and should be all about for every person to whom the care of God's church has been entrusted in His name. So the first priority of every pastor is to give rest to those entrusted to him. Urging and admonishing don't come first, but giving rest in God's presence comes first. From that place of rest and deep trust all other things that must be said and done appear in their proper perspective. Leading people towards this rest in God can be done through preaching, teaching and personal counseling. Most people regularly pass through dark valleys in their lives, and our job as a pastor is to give them rest and to supply them with spiritual food and water, so that their strength is renewed. This rest is the restfulness of a child, as described by David in Psalm 131: *'I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother.'* Paul speaks of this rest in Romans 8:35: *'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?'*

Following all their many wanderings in life, a pastor always leads his church members back to the quiet waters and the green pastures of the forgiveness of sin, and the tender mercies of Christ. How

wonderful it is to sit together at the feet of Jesus. To stop labouring, toiling and achieving and instead to receive and to consciously experience God's presence. This is the rest every believer may enjoy; it is a place to which the pastor may often lead his 'harassed and helpless' flock. As a pastor, always make this a priority in everything you do. Keep asking yourself: 'How can I guide the believers entrusted to my leadership towards the restfulness of living with Jesus?'

Good and bad shepherds

The Bible gives us beautiful descriptions of the pastor's role as a good shepherd. But it also speaks of bad shepherds. In Ezekiel 34:7-10, God is deeply angry with the bad shepherds who should have been leading the flock of Israel in His name. *'My shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock'* (verse 8). This is the greatest danger facing both the shepherd and the flock: that the shepherd, and not the flock, starts to take centre stage. This is not God's view of things. In the rest of Ezekiel chapter 34, God clearly outlines the tasks of a shepherd. A good shepherd rescues his sheep from all the places where they are scattered on a day of clouds and darkness (verse 12). He searches for the lost, brings back the strays and has them lie down (verse 15). He binds up the injured and strengthens the weak (verse 16). He judges between one sheep and another (verse 22). This is how God takes care of His people, like a good shepherd. And He wants every shepherd who leads people in His name to do the same. If they don't, God gets rid of them and appoints other shepherds who will serve the sheep the way He wants them to (verse 23). So we see that there are clear differences between a good shepherd and a bad one.

When Jesus uses the image of a shepherd to discuss spiritual leadership in John 10, He, too, makes a distinction between good and bad shepherds. He does so in response to the Pharisees, who have confronted him after he has healed a blind man. Previously, the Pharisees had decided that anyone who acknowledged Jesus as Lord would be put out of the synagogue and out of the Jewish community (9:22). But the healed man ignores their decision, honours Jesus for his healing and then, in fact, gets thrown out of the synagogue (9:34).

Jesus hears about it and quickly finds the man, who soon comes to faith in Him. Then Jesus explains the difference between how the Pharisees have treated the man and how He Himself has treated him. He compares it to the difference between a hired hand and a good shepherd (John 10:10-15). A hired hand works for money, for his own gain, he says. When the sheep are in danger, he abandons them, showing that he doesn't care about them. His own wellbeing is more important to him than that of the sheep.

A good shepherd's behaviour is just the opposite, says Jesus in verse 11: *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'* That's what David did when his father's flock was attacked by wild animals: he chased away the lion or the bear (1 Samuel 17:34-35). It's what every good shepherd would do. As a good shepherd, you'll do anything to protect the flock. At this stage, Jesus points to Himself: He is the good shepherd who will lay down his life for his flock (verse 17). Only a real shepherd will be truly followed by his sheep. Because he is always with them, shares his life with them and will do anything for them, they know his voice and follow him. God is just such a shepherd and His son Jesus is just such a shepherd. And He wants every person who leads His church in His name to be just such a good shepherd. The words Jesus used to commission Peter when appointing him as a pastor apply to every pastor: *"Take care of my sheep"* (John 21:16).

Leading the church, then, is identical to shepherding God's flock. Once you've grasped this, you know what your assignment is in the church. You know the difference between a good and a bad shepherd. You have the greatest shepherd of all as your example. And in His name and strength you may be a pastor, a shepherd.

There is immense encouragement for pastors in the words Peter writes towards the end of his epistle about shepherding: *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you"* (1 Peter 5:7). The truth that applies to every other child of God applies to the pastor as well: the Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing!

A church leader in Iraq told me that pastors in his country must

often lead their flocks under very difficult circumstances. In Baghdad, they can hardly move through the city or beyond it for fear of shootings and kidnappings. Yet they, too, wish to take care of their flocks. How can they be good shepherds? 'There are two kinds of shepherds', this leader told me. 'Those who go out ahead of the flock are the shepherds with vision and with a goal. They want their congregation to grow, to move forward and to be a part of the advancement of God's Kingdom. But because they are out in front, they're not aware of what is going on within the flock, they don't know the sheep that are wounded, they don't see those about to give up or wander off. The second walk behind the flock. These shepherds see exactly what is going on among the sheep, they know them well and take good care of them. But meanwhile the flock doesn't get anywhere, its development stagnates and it wanders about aimlessly.' When I asked him which kind of shepherd the church of Iraq needs most, he answered with a big smile: 'Every church needs both kinds.' The lesson I learned from this persecuted colleague is that there are indeed very few pastors who combine both qualities. The church will be best cared for if it is served by two kinds of pastors: the visionary and the comforter.

The calling of a pastor

Anyone who has discovered what the task of a pastor involves will know it is something you can never do on your own initiative. Moses did not decide to lead the people of Israel of his own accord, David did not anoint himself king, the prophets did not prophesy at their own discretion. Even the slightest awareness of the great responsibility of a pastor should be enough to discourage anyone from taking up the task on his own initiative. How could anyone speak for God and lead his church on their own initiative? In 2 Corinthians 2:16, we can almost hear Paul heave a sigh as he exclaims, *“And who is equal to such a task?”*

The New Testament clearly tells us how the future leaders of the church, the disciples, were personally called by Jesus. In John 15:16 Jesus emphasises this: *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.”* Later we hear Paul, who himself was so powerfully called by Jesus near Damascus, say in Romans 10:15: *“And how can anyone preach unless they are sent?”* Without a clear calling from God, you cannot be a pastor. But how does God call a person, how do you recognise that He is the one directing you towards pastorship?

A special calling

The church affirms that every believer is called to be a witness of Jesus in this world. In that sense, everyone who knows Jesus has a calling to serve Him. In addition to that, we read in the Bible that God calls some people to a special assignment. So there is a general calling to be a witness and a special calling to perform a special task in God's kingdom. These special tasks are all aimed at supporting the believers in their calling to serve God and to testify about Jesus. Here's how Paul explains it in Ephesians 4:11-12: *“So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service.”*

Among his brothers and sisters, a pastor, therefore, has a special place.

This doesn't mean he is better, more spiritual or holier, but only that he has received a special assignment. In the Bible we see that Jesus gives the gifts of the Spirit to the whole church. The body of Christ is made up of the church as a whole and each member is gifted to serve the others and to build them up in their faith. Within and for the benefit of that whole, God's Spirit appoints pastors to provide the church with spiritual leadership (Acts 20:28).

An inner compulsion

How does this calling by God's Spirit work? In short, it is a special way of being touched or spoken to. Sometimes it is a portion of Scripture, sometimes a dream or a vision, sometimes another person's advice, sometimes a real, audible voice that you hear inside your head. God calls his servants in different ways, but the result of the call is always that the person being called is completely overcome by it. It becomes an inner compulsion pushing you towards becoming a pastor. It becomes bound up with your heart and it won't let go. You may not necessarily feel happy or grateful right away; receiving a calling can also make you feel frightened or uncertain. Most of the callings in the Old Testament demonstrate this: Moses was unwilling because he couldn't speak well, Jeremiah felt he was too young, Jonah didn't want to proclaim God's message to the enemy and so on and so forth. And yet, once you've become aware of God's calling in your life, you can't get away from it, somehow or other it has a hold on you.

This compulsion to serve as a pastor is not just a burden, but also a token of immense grace. Paul says to Timothy: *"Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task"* (1 Timothy 3:1). What a privilege it is to be in the immediate service of the Holy One and to be a part of the Lord's ministry, to be set apart day after day to dig for treasure in Scripture and to help God's children stay close to their Saviour. You're granted the joy of being Christ's co-worker, of seeing God's Spirit at work under your own eyes. As a pastor, you're occupied with work that has eternal value right in the middle of everyday life, shedding the light of God on the lives of people you meet. It is a grave responsibility, but also a beautiful mission!

Compassion for people

A second characteristic of being called to be a pastor, besides that inner compulsion to serve God, is that you develop a great compassion for people. The realisation that all those people living and working around you are lost without Jesus pierces your heart. You're moved with the same compassion Jesus felt when He saw the crowds, *"harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"* (Matthew 9:36). Paul, too, speaks of this tremendous compassion in 2 Corinthians 5:14: *"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."* If you realise that without Jesus people will perish for ever, you cannot remain placid and unmoved as you work in the Kingdom; you will be driven by a holy zeal. In verse 11, Paul has already said: *"Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others."* In view of the approaching second coming of Jesus, a pastor's work is always fuelled by a sense of urgency.

One summer, my family and I visited the Victory 4 All project in the slums of Jeffrey's Bay, South Africa. The founders of the project, Johan and Astrid Vos, by this time had spent over 10 years working among the poorest of the poor in this country. As we worked and spent time together, we spoke a lot about the meaning of the work. The misery in a slum area is so overwhelming that it makes your efforts seem futile. What touched me most of all was the compassion of the project's leaders and staff members. Rather than looking for big results, they have a daily awareness of their calling to be there in Jesus' name and to do good to whomever they meet in the shanties and in the mud. What keeps them going from day to day is a desire to share Jesus with all those hopeless people, helping them with food, education and social support. This is their motive: "Our assignment is to sow, to present Jesus, because we love these rejected people, because God loves them and because neither He nor any of us wants any of them to perish!"

Letting go of everything

Becoming a pastor, then, starts with a personal calling from God.

However, you won't become a pastor unless you give your full consent. A calling from God must definitely be answered by the pastor-to-be. It must be followed by a deliberate choice to be obedient and to follow wherever God will lead. We can see this clearly in the lives of the disciples. Jesus calls them away from their daily activities to follow Him and to save people. They are to become 'fishers of men'. But they have to leave their nets behind. Being called to become a pastor tears you away from your normal patterns. Serving Jesus is not something you can do on the side, it is a radically different way of living.

Jesus shows us the significance of this by the distinction He makes between the disciples and the crowd. If you were to summarise what the gospels tell us about the disciples and about the crowd, you could say that the members of the crowd listen to Jesus, witness His miracles and that many of them believe in Him. However, they do not join in building his Kingdom; they don't become a part of the movement Jesus has set in motion. They are timeservers, not followers. They're more like interested spectators than participants. Jesus touches them, but they do not leave their normal, day-to-day patterns of living.

Becoming a real disciple calls for more, as Jesus explains in Luke 14:25-35. In verse 26, he indicates that not everyone who follows Him is necessarily a disciple. Only those who *"hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life"* can genuinely be disciples of Jesus. This statement is not meant to disparage family ties; it is about loving God above everything and everyone else. Your family, loved ones, friends and colleagues are all valuable, but if you wish to be a disciple and to join in the work of the Kingdom, your life – every aspect of it – must be governed by Jesus. Serving Jesus means letting go of everything that is more important to you than He is, everything that might distract you from serving Him. No longer are you governed by people around you, or by your own will, Jesus governs your life, both present and future.

Paul shows us what this means when in Philippians 3:8 he writes: *"I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage."* He is referring to the things he used to be proud of,

things on which he based his identity. If you wish to work side by side with Jesus, everything that until now gave you a sense of security and stability, everything you were proud of, must be removed. In this context, your relationships also hold second place. Every disciple who desires to follow and serve the Saviour, including a pastor with a calling, must break with anything that might hinder his service. It is a step of obedience that can only be taken on the basis of the love of Jesus. Anyone who knows His love will desire nothing more than to live nearer to Him. To such a person, pursuing Him is not a sacrifice but a deep desire.

Cross-bearing

Directly after Jesus has spoken about the obedience required of a disciple, remarkably, he goes on to emphasise that discipleship also means you will have to suffer with Him. In Luke 14:27, He says: *"And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."* Working alongside Jesus, also as a pastor, means that, just like Him, you must bear a cross. Not His cross, for He carried that Himself, but your own cross. Every disciple, every pastor, will in his own unique way experience the burden of people's resistance against the cross, against grace, against the exclusive way to salvation through Jesus alone. Even Paul said he proclaimed the gospel of the cross in fear and trembling, because it was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1 and 2).

Carrying the cross in the footsteps of Jesus is characterised by being rejected, excluded, by becoming a stranger on earth. Does this mean the pastor is some sort of misfit? It doesn't sound attractive and it isn't. But that's what it means to walk in Jesus' footsteps. It won't make you rich, popular or successful, but it will draw you closer to Him. Only then will you be united with Him in His suffering and thereby also partake of His glory (Philippians 3:10,11).

Being called to be a pastor, then, is a far-reaching destiny, a process of hearing and obeying. It is about discovering step by step the path God has for you and how you can obey, using your gifts. Often it is a long process, in which knowing God and getting to know yourself better

and better, are of vital importance. This enables you to make sure the calling is genuine and that you will respond to it in the right manner and at the right time.

A church leader in Pakistan once told me that in his country, where pastors face tremendous pressure, a man who indicates that he wishes to become a pastor is not immediately sent to a theological seminary. First he is prepared for a number of years, sometimes as many as ten. He is given a support role in a church organisation and is encouraged to acquire the language and other skills he will need later at seminary. In the workplace, he learns what it means to be a Christian in daily practice. He is familiarised with what it means to be in the service of God. Only after a time, if he has genuinely received a calling from God, is he considered ready to go to seminary and become a pastor.

In view of the great responsibility every pastor carries, I believe this is a lesson from the Suffering Church that we must take seriously. We should prepare aspiring pastors for working in a church by first giving them a position that does not involve huge responsibilities. Meanwhile, help them hone their skills, their character and their spiritual life and only then send them off to seminary. It doesn't have to take 10 years, but spending 2 or 3 years working in the kingdom before starting your formal pastoral education seems more effective to me than going to seminary before you've even begun this fundamental journey of discovery.

In Acts, the Biblical route followed for the calling of pastors is that the congregation gathers together in prayer and that the Spirit then appoints individuals who are to be ordained as pastors by the church. In Acts 13: 2 and 3 this same procedure is followed: *“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”* There is an intimate interaction between being chosen by the Spirit and being sent off by the church. There is a calling from above and a calling from below and the two cannot be separated. The

pastor is a servant of God, called by the Spirit, and his calling is confirmed and implemented by the church.

The anointing of the Spirit

You can be confident that you have been called by the Spirit by the fact that He empowers your life and ministry. Every believer receives the Holy Spirit, but again and again we read about people in the Bible who received a special assignment from God and a special anointing of the Spirit to go with it. The most obvious example is Jesus, who at the beginning of His ministry was baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. When He came up out of the water, He received a beautiful confirmation of His calling. Mark's gospel describes this scene as follows: *"Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove..."* (Mark 1:10). Even Jesus depended on the power of the Spirit to fulfil His divine calling and this was confirmed by the Spirit's descent on Him. Something similar happened to the disciples on the first day of Pentecost. They, too, were commissioned to be witnesses all over the world, however, Jesus had told them, *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses..."* (Acts 1:8). The anointing of the Spirit means your life becomes so entwined with God's Spirit that He is in charge of your comings and goings, He shapes your character, and you learn to sense and to obey His guidance. To receive this anointing, you do have to consciously open your heart and fully focus on the direction of the Spirit.

How do you open yourself to the anointing of the Spirit upon your life as a pastor? The Bible only gives one answer to that question. The key to opening your heart to the special guidance of the Spirit is prayer. Jesus was praying when He received the Spirit at His baptism in the Jordan. Luke 3:21 says: *"And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove."* When the disciples were filled with the Spirit on the first day of Pentecost, they were gathered together in prayer, too: *"After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly"* (Acts 4:31). The confirmation of your calling by the anointing of the Spirit, therefore,

comes through prayer. That's why you mustn't let anything or anyone get in the way of your prayer time, because if your prayer life is hindered, the Spirit's anointing of your ministry as a pastor will be hindered.

Confirmation by the church

We have seen that your calling must be confirmed by God through the anointing of His Spirit. That is the first and most important confirmation. But again and again in the Bible this calling is also confirmed by the church of Christ. From Acts 13:2 and 3 (see above) it is clear that the Spirit calls, whereas the church sends off those who are called by blessing them through the laying on of hands. Your ordination as a pastor should be done in and by the congregation. In that way your calling is confirmed not only by God, but also by His church. The church thus recognises your calling and gifts, your faith and your suitability. You will need this recognition to be accepted as a pastor. Through the anointing of the Spirit you receive God's confirmation of your calling, and through the ordination in church you receive the acceptance of your calling by the congregation – and with that, the authority to address them from God's Word and to lead them. You will need this recognition to provide spiritual leadership and to be respected and revered by the congregation.

A calling by God to be a pastor starts as an inner compulsion, is followed by the anointing of the Spirit for the task at hand, and is confirmed through the ordination, or sending off, by the church of Christ.

The spiritual life of a pastor

Setting an example

Being a pastor is a way of life. Your entire existence is geared to serving the advancement of the kingdom in the place to which you've been called. A pastor is not just someone who points the way to living a life that honours God, he sets an example, too. The credibility of what a pastor says depends on the life he lives. A congregation watches its pastor to see how he puts into practice what he teaches them about walking with Jesus. And rightly so.

Paul repeatedly sets himself as an example. To the church of Corinth he says: *"Therefore I urge you to imitate me"* (1 Corinthians 4:16). Being an example like this can be paralysing if it makes you feel that as a pastor you have to be some sort of perfect Christian. Thankfully, this is not the case; if it was, who could be a pastor? It does mean that in every aspect of your life you deliberately seek to serve God, to follow Jesus and to be led by the Holy Spirit. The only way you can be an example for your congregation is by consciously living in close communion with God. Here's another way of putting it: being a spiritual leader requires you to live a spiritual life. Paul emphasises this in a beautiful statement that every pastor should keep stored in his heart: *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers"* (Acts 20:28). A spiritual leader cannot survive without caring for his own soul. Be aware as a pastor that each new day you must first receive from God before you can give out in His name! The question is: how do we nourish ourselves spiritually, how do we lead a spiritual life?

Let me mention three aspects of spiritual life that a pastor, keeping watch over his own soul, must take into account. There are other issues as well, but throughout Christian tradition these three have been considered the three most important aspects of spiritual life. A pastor who observes these three points will grow in Christ and therefore also in his ministry in the church. In a meditation on Psalm 119, the well-known theologian Martin Luther mentions these three

pillars of Christian spirituality: prayer (oratio), meditating on God's Word (meditatio) and spiritual battle (tentatio).

Prayer

The first thing about the spiritual life of a pastor is that he must lead a prayerful life. Although this is such a vital issue for every pastor, it is often the first thing to be forgotten or neglected under the pressure of all the work. Be aware that unless you maintain that intimate, personal communion with God in your own life, you cannot lead God's children into His presence! Prayer is a form of hidden communion with God, it is what nourishes your relationship with the heavenly Father. If you prayerfully share your whole life with Him, your sins and your wounds, your joys and your sorrows, He will give you comfort and strength. Spending time in prayer with your Sender will place all your labouring and your concerns in a very different light. They will cease to be your responsibility and instead become God's. Staying tuned to God through prayer will take the worst pressure off your shoulders. Instead of you leading your life, He will lead it. Instead of you leading the church, He will lead it. Only he who daily practices the presence of God will persevere and continue to grow and to blossom spiritually.

The best example of a praying pastor is Jesus Himself. Again and again we read that He was praying, that He withdrew to be alone with His Father. In Mark 6:46, it says: *"After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray."* Especially before facing special events or responsibilities, Jesus takes time to pray. For instance, we read in Luke 6:12 and 13 that he prayed intensely before He chose His 12 disciples: *"One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles."* Other well-known examples are Jesus' prayers for Himself and the believers in John 17 and His prayer in Gethsemane, just before His crucifixion (Luke 22:41).

Intercession

In addition to personal prayer, every pastor is also charged to pray continually for the members of his congregation. When Jethro saw

that both Moses and the people were burdened by Moses' heavy pastoral workload, he counselled his son-in-law, offering him a priority list for sound spiritual leadership. The first thing Jethro mentions is this: "You must speak to God for the people" (Exodus 18:19). A pastor's first priority is not to spend as much time as possible among the people, his top priority is to take the people to God in prayer. This is what Jesus did in His prayers, too. Listen to His prayer in John 17 and hear how he prays for His people: *"I pray for them. I am not praying for the world. I am praying for those you have given me, because they are yours"* (John 17:9).

Another fine example of a praying pastor in the Bible is Epaphras, concerning whom Paul, in Colossians 4:12, says: *"Epaphras sends greetings. He is one of you. He serves Christ Jesus. He is always praying hard for you. He prays that you will stand firm in holding to all that God has in mind for us."*

A pastor who prays for his church members is like a man fighting for them. You pleads for them with God, praying that they will stand firm and grow in faith, hope and love. You prayerfully fight alongside them, like Moses did when the people of Israel fought against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-13). As long as he kept praying for them, they were winning, but every time he lowered his hands, they began to lose. That's why Aaron and Hur supported his arms, so that he could keep praying for them until the battle had been won. This is what a pastor's prayers for his people are all about. Moses, Jesus and the apostles are the pastor's examples in praying for those entrusted to their care.

But how do you put this into practice as a pastor? People often ask their pastor to pray for them personally. Of course, you promise you will, but it's almost impossible to actually take time out for every single prayer request. One way of dealing with this is to pray for that man or woman on the spot, while he or she is with you. Another approach is to take time out at the end of each day to intercede for everyone you have met that day. You can also use your members' list to pray for each individual member, one by one, during a certain period (perhaps having a photo of the congregation would help). That way you will be praying for the whole congregation and not just for those in need.

These are ways of taking them to God in prayer, pleading for them with their heavenly Father, representing them to their Lord. They may be too restless that day to pray themselves, but you will be taking time out to speak to God for them and on their behalf.

I have prayed for you

By the way, it's good to let your people know that you pray for them. Jesus told Peter that He had prayed for him: "*Simon, Simon! Satan has asked to sift you disciples like wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon. I have prayed that your faith will not fail*" (Luke 22:31,32). In almost every letter he writes, Paul tells the churches he writes how he prays for them. It encourages people and gives them hope and expectation. At the same time, it offers them an example of a prayerful life. As church members experience how uplifting it is to hear that someone is praying for them, they will pray for others more consciously.

A lesson I have learned from the Suffering Church is that a prayerful life involves more than just praying for oneself and one's church. You are a human being, living and moving consciously and compassionately among other human beings. Those others, too, will benefit from your prayerful attention.

Church leaders facing persecution emphasise in every conversation about their pastors and churches that they continuously pray for their country. One of them, an Egyptian, says: "We identify with our people. We pray zealously for a revival and we are prepared to pay the price if the Kingdom of God can be advanced in our country. Egypt is our mother. So our hearts cry and we beg God that revival will come soon, that Jesus will draw the hearts of the Egyptian people to Himself."

A church leader from Pakistan says he knows for a fact that all the pastors he is acquainted with begin their personal and intercessory prayers not by bringing their own situation and church life before God, but by praying first for their people and their nation, for a revival among Pakistan's 180 million Muslims. The compassion of these pastors for their countries, with all the fiercely anti-Christian forces at work there, is a tremendous

example to us all.

Finally, living a prayerful life involves the dual movement of deliberately consecrating time and space for prayer on the one hand, while staying tuned to God throughout the day on the other. In the first instance, prayer is entering into communion with God in the inner room (Matthew 6:6). What matters most in the inner room is not so much everything we want to tell God, but our worshipping Him. Worshipping Him means you don't focus your attention primarily on God's hands, but you seek His heart – or, as the Bible calls it, God's face. It is an inner attuning to His presence, a quiet delight in who He is. In this quietness and rest, you become more and more aware of God's love, God's glory, God's abundance. This is what Jesus refers to in John 15:4: *“Remain in me, as I also remain in you.”* In this wonderful communion with God you will receive everything you need as a pastor: God's love, the grace of Jesus' and the filling of the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, a prayerful life also means staying tuned to God throughout the day, walking by the Spirit: not just in those consecrated moments, but throughout your whole existence. The life of a pastor is one big prayer. This is what Paul means when he says: *“Pray continually”* (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Daniel was in charge of the greatest empire of his day and we read about him that it was his custom to pray three times a day facing Jerusalem (Daniel 6:10,11,13). Prayer was his source of strength and he would not be robbed of it by anyone or anything – even if he had to pay for it with his life. Pastors, especially, are too busy not to pray.

A church leader from Bhutan told me how a lack of education and resources drives pastors in Bhutan to draw their strength from prayer. Prayer is their top priority. Before making any decisions or taking any action, they pray. Most pastors, he said, spend every morning in prayer. Often they find that God provides guidance during these prayer times, making His will clear to them – which sometimes means they have to change their plans after praying. “Especially when facing major

decisions or difficult situations, we fast and pray. We're used to fasting. On Sunday morning, the whole church fasts to prepare for the church service and for fellowship. The pastor fasts and prays first, then makes decisions. In Bhutan this is the pastor's rule of thumb: fast, pray, go."

Meditation

A life dedicated to praying to God cannot do without the same kind of commitment to meditating on God's Word. Meditation is the second pillar of a healthy spiritual life for pastors. Prayer is our answer, our response to what God has said to us. There is an ongoing interaction between praying and reading the Bible. Without prayer, the Bible will not come to life for you, and without the Bible your prayer life will soon languish. A pastor who wishes to lead a spiritual life and to breathe prayer cannot survive without regularly and attentively listening to what God says to him in His Word.

The Bible is full of texts that emphasise the importance of God's Word to every believer. The Psalms, in particular, celebrate the great wealth and eternal value of the Word. The Word is a source of assurance, comfort and strength. The Word shows you the way, keeps you close to God. It's a great joy to be occupied with the Word. It starts right in Psalm 1: *"Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night"* (Psalm 1:1,2). Psalm 119 is one big hymn to the value of the Word. In verse 11, the poet sings: *"I have hidden your word in my heart."* In verse 105, we hear these well-known words: *"Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."* This holds true for every Christian.

The Pakistani church leader whom I mentioned earlier told me that in an environment in which the Quran is considered sacred and the Bible blasphemous, the value of the Bible to Christians is unrelinquishable. This pastor spends much time during the day studying the Bible, because he believes it is the living Word of God: "The Bible contains the church's itinerary. We can only get to know God through the Bible. The Bible is a living book, because its 'Author' is a living Person. He has promised to guide

us through His Word."

This applies especially to those responsible for leading God's people and church. For instance, when God calls Joshua to replace Moses, He says: *"Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful"* (Joshua 1:8). Of all people, a pastor living and working in the service of God cannot do without daily immersion in the Word of God. Paul asserts this, too, in his instructions to Timothy on what really matters in leading the church of Christ. In 2 Timothy 3:15 to 17, he says this: *"... from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* Paul is not trying to convince Timothy of the truth of God's Word here, because Timothy has long accepted that. What he's saying is that the Word can aid and equip him as a pastor. So, again, a pastor cannot do without daily interaction with the Word. Meditating on it must be part and parcel of the spiritual life of every pastor.

Meditating on the Word is something that, in the first place, you do for your own good. The great danger for every pastor is to view the Bible merely as a vast store of sermon texts. You scour it for suitable material for sermons, pastoral care or Bible studies. Your reading becomes purely functional and the Bible ceases to represent God's Word for your own life. But we can only pass on a message to others with any real authority, if we have ourselves read and lived through the Scripture passage in question. You must listen before you speak. This listening to God's Word is what we call meditation.

Eat this book

In several Bible passages, meditation is compared with eating. For example: *"Eat it"* (see Revelation 10:8-11). 'Eating' God's Word is a good metaphor for contemplating the Word. If you are offered food you've not tasted before, you start with a small mouthful. You carefully

taste the food, you're eager to discover its flavour. Then you want more, so you start chewing, which releases more of its flavour. Finally you swallow it, so that it can nourish your body.

That's what meditating on a passage of Scripture is like:

Step 1)

Take a few verses, or read a short passage, and reread it several times, slowly and attentively. Read it out loud once, so that you can actually hear the words. Listen to the text as if you're hearing it for the first time. This will give you a first impression, helping you to get familiar with it and to internalise it. The best way is to memorise the words of the text, so that you can take them with you into the day or week. This is how to 'taste' a text.

Step 2)

Now try digging a little deeper, by trying to bring the words and images of the text to life. What do you see as you read them, what do you hear, feel, think? What is happening in the text? This is how to 'chew', or 'ruminate', on the words.

Step 3)

Next, allow the words and their effect on you to penetrate you deeply. Do they make you happy or sad, grateful or angry? Can you wholeheartedly embrace them or do they provoke resistance? Do these words call for a change in your life? Do they affect your view of God, the world around you, or yourself? Questions like these will help you digest the text. You're allowing God's words to enter into your life and change things. This is how you 'swallow' God's Word, as it were, allowing it to enter into your inner being.

Step 4)

Conclude your meditation by praying that the Spirit will renew your life through this Word. Surrender to Him. Then you can rest in His presence. Finally, thank God for who He is and for the Word of grace and truth, which you have just received.

Take time

You will understand that meditating on the Word, like prayer, requires you to consciously set apart time and space. If possible, set aside a fixed hour of the day and find a quiet spot where you can listen to God's Word without being disturbed. Make sure you really take time. Meditating is like digging for treasure: it can take quite a while before you unearth the riches you're seeking. But the more you search, the more beautiful the treasure will often be.

When I once asked a church leader in Egypt what motivated his pastoral candidates above everything else, he answered without hesitation: "Their love for the Word of God." No matter how difficult the circumstances faced by pastors in Egypt, their deep desire to read God's Word, to meditate on it and to pass it on overcomes all. In the past, many pastors used to add the letters 'VDM' to their surname. They stand for the Latin words 'Verbi Divini Minister', or servant of the divine word. Essentially, that is what you are as a pastor, both on Sundays and during the week: a servant of the Word. You live with this Word and work with it. The Egyptian pastors are truly 'VDMs'.

Authority

A pastor's interaction with the Word not only nourishes his life with God, it is also the source of his authority in the church. People do not believe a pastor because of what he has to say, but because of what God has to say through him. Your authority is given you as a servant of the Word, as one who opens, explains and applies the Word to the believers. It is good to remind ourselves of this again and again. Admittedly, there are other ways in which God makes Himself known. Sometimes people receive prophecies or visions in which they recognise God's voice or instruction. But in such cases, there is never a 100% guarantee that the message received is entirely and exclusively from God and that it is not mixed with personal desires or motives. The Word of God is the only pure source by which we can get to know God's will. That's why a pastor must always be able to trace back everything he says in his preaching and counselling to the Word. If, as a pastor, you speak without living intensely from God's Word, your words will soon

become superficial. Being allowed and empowered to speak genuinely on behalf of God calls for the discipline of daily meditation.

Spiritual battle

The third aspect of spiritual life mentioned by Luther is struggle. This aspect is less a matter of spiritual exercise than prayer and meditation are. Rather, the spiritual battle is the situation in which every Christian – and therefore every pastor – finds himself. It is of vital importance for your spiritual life that you realise you are in a battle zone. Paul explicitly warns us that this battle is not against people, *“but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Ephesians 6:12). This explains why whenever we pray, meditate, preach and provide spiritual leadership, there is always a tension, a sense of being in a struggle. Sometimes we feel pressure from within, sometimes from without.

Trials

The Bible tells us that these experiences are trials we must face. Such trials can appear in your life in many different ways. You may pass through a spiritual desert, a period in which your fellowship with God seems all but barren. These are times in which it seems as if God has turned His back on you. Psalm 27 speaks of such a time of seeking God's face without finding it. In verse 8 and 9, David sings: *“My heart says of you, “Seek his face!” Your face, LORD, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger.”* At the end of this Psalm, however, he tells us how best to deal with these situations. In verse 14, David sings: *“Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”* Be patient, keep on expectantly seeking His presence, because at some point He will draw near again.

Another trial you might face as a pastor is when you are criticised by members of your congregation. They may say you're not doing a good job, they may complain about your sermons, or disagree with you on some principal issue. Everyone holding a leadership position in a group, including those in the church of Christ, will experience this. What matters most when it happens is that on the one hand you take

your critics seriously, honestly asking yourself whether they are right, while on the other hand you make sure that your identity as a pastor is not anchored in the favour of the people, but in the calling and commission you have received from God.

In times of trouble, it is also vital that you follow Jesus' example. When out in the wilderness the devil threatened His ministry and His very life (Matthew 4), He did not start arguing with Satan, but consistently responded with a word of God. He parried the attacks in that spiritual desert with the words of God spoken during Israel's desert journey, as described in Deuteronomy. This teaches us that we should always search the Scriptures for situations similar to ours, so that we will learn to react to our trials with the wisdom of God.

Satan

A key characteristic of Satan's attacks is that he tries to undermine our trust in God, so that we revert to acting on our own natural impulses. Take a look at the three attacks he launches on Jesus in Matthew 4. They're typical of how he tries to trip up people who are committed to serving the Kingdom. First comes the temptation of prosperity (tell these stones to become bread); then the temptation of manipulating God and using Him for one's own purposes (throw yourself from the highest point of the temple and the angels will carry you); then the temptation of power and status (bow down to me and all the kingdoms of the world will be yours). Every honest pastor knows these temptations. Know that they do not come from God, but from within. James 1:13 puts it this way: *"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' ... but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed."* The challenge is to resist and overcome temptation through the power of Jesus, who knows exactly what it's like: *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin"* (Hebrews 4:15).

Every pastor, then, is tossed around and tested by trials from within and temptations from without. Once you know this through God's

Word, you can be on the alert. Trials and temptations are part of the spiritual battle you are in. A pastor, in particular, operates on the front line. So don't be surprised if you find yourself under attack. It would be more alarming if you never found yourself under attack.

When you are attacked, and you're struggling to hold your ground and stay close to Jesus, remember what Paul told the church of Corinth: *"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it"* (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The daily life of the pastor

Sacramental living

Living and working in the service of God as a pastor calls for a spiritual lifestyle. Your life with God is not limited to the inner room, but expresses itself in the practical realities of everyday existence. What people see and hear of you shows them what matters most to you deep down inside. And you can be sure that church members keep an eye on the life of their pastor. You're the one who proclaims the Word of God and teaches them how to live to His honour, so it's only logical that they look at you to see how you practice what you preach. Particularly in his letters to Timothy, Pauls talks about being an example to your congregation as a pastor. God's great desire is for the stamp of Christ to become more and more visible in our daily lives. When that happens, people will see it and long for it themselves. That's how Christ works in and through His servants. It's not about the pastor, it's about Christ. By your sacramental living, you will be passing on to the congregation the salvation you received from Jesus, even as you walk and talk with them from day to day.

In 1 Timothy 4, Paul offers a number of specific instructions for the pastor's daily life. He says in verse 12: *"...set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity."* So there are five areas in which as a pastor Timothy may set an example, not because he's so perfect, but because Christ is at work in him.

Speech

The first thing Paul mentions is that as a pastor you set an example by the way you speak. A pastor spends a lot of time talking, as a counsellor, during meetings and in the pulpit. The way you speak says a lot about what lives in your heart. Jesus says in Matthew 12:34: *"The mouth speaks what the heart is full of."* People will know who and what matters most to you by what you say and how you say it. In verse 37, Jesus continues: *"For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."* Both in the Old and the New Testament, a lot of attention is devoted to our

words, because they can be a force for good or for evil. With words you can both damage and restore people. Especially those who live and work in Jesus' name, must be aware of the healing power of the right word spoken at the right moment. Paul says in Ephesians 4:29: *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."* This means that as a pastor you always have to be on the alert, especially if you are a regular public speaker, because your words are a testimony of your walk with Jesus. I always pray the words of Psalm 19:14 whenever I am to speak in public: *"May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight..."*

Conduct

The second area in which as a pastor you are called to set the example is your conduct, or lifestyle. What this means in practice, Paul shows us in 1 Timothy 3:2, where he is dealing with those appointed as overseers in God's Kingdom. He mentions four characteristics that apply specifically to church leaders: *"Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach..."*

Firstly, then, a pastor must be faithful to his wife. In other words, he must be **monogamous** in his thoughts and actions. This was an important instruction to pastors who were formerly unbelievers living a very different lifestyle: they were now called to reflect the love and faithfulness of Jesus in how they lived with their wife. This meant in those days: do not beat your wife, do not take more than one wife. It is also an important instruction to pastors who regularly interact with women or conduct intensive counselling sessions with women. There is always the risk of – often unconsciously – stretching the boundaries. It's vital to combine spiritual fellowship with physical distance. In counselling, make sure you don't touch the other person, not even as a gesture of comfort. If you are pastorally engaged with a member of the other sex intensively and for a long time, it is advisable to avoid meeting her alone, but rather to involve another (female) counsellor or your own wife.

The next characteristic of a pastor's lifestyle is **temperance and self-control** –Paul mentions these to counter the love of money mentioned in the following verses. As a pastor, you're not pursuing wealth and success, trying to amass more and more wealth. It may be in your nature, as it is in everyone's to a greater or lesser degree. But Jesus Himself constantly warns against riches and the power of money, the unrighteous Mammon. It is a serious risk, especially for pastors. They often work hard for little money, while many church members around them are better off than they are. You may experience fierce temptations in this area, an inner desire for more, bigger, better. However, as a pastor you are not to focus on worldly success; rather, you may enjoy the riches of God's blessings. Keep reminding yourself of this. Your identity is not determined by what you possess, but by who you are in Christ: you are a child of the Father, Who says to you: “...*everything I have is yours*” (Luke 15:31).

Another temptation you may face as a pastor is to use your position and spiritual authority in the church for financial gain. This already occurred in Paul's day. In 2 Corinthians 2:17, he says: “*Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit.*” People tend to give more easily to someone who offers them spiritual guidance than to anyone else, because of the relation of trust. It can be easy to abuse that trust. A pastor must be inwardly independent of money and possessions. If he isn't, his work will not bear fruit, because he will be serving 'two masters'. All over the world, one of the ways in which the unique differentness of “*the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ*” (Ephesians 4:20) is expressed, is how believers handle money and possessions.

An Egyptian church leader told me that the pastors in Egypt are all poor. They know from the moment they start their theological training that their future will be one of poverty. There are several reasons for this. One is that the church assumes God will take care of His servants, which means pastors are underpaid. They're not allowed to take a job on the side either, because as pastors they are expected to be available for working in God's Kingdom 24/7. When I asked

how they solve this problem, the church leader answered: "They learn to trust God and live soberly." One of the advantages of their sober lifestyles is that they can connect easily with Egypt's many poor church members, who would have difficulty accepting a rich pastor. On the other hand, the families of Egyptian pastors have to endure a lot of tensions because of their economic position. What we can learn from this is that a sober lifestyle will enable you to connect with everyone in your congregation, including those with the lowest incomes. A pastor should never belong to the elite, but rather should be free to interact with everyone.

A third characteristic of the exemplary conduct of a church leader is that he must be **respectable, hospitable and above reproach**. These qualities all have to do with avoiding self-centredness and instead placing the interests of others above your own, thus practicing genuine love for your fellow man. This is not some artificial, sentimental or professional niceness, but real, authentic interest in others. A pastor does not only love God, he also genuinely loves people. And people notice. He has a large heart. Deeply loved by God, he finds within himself the space to love others, to truly see them, hear them, and receive them. This means you will often have to efface yourself and forgo your own plans. Your family, too, will often have to make sacrifices for the sake of letting others go first.

This sacrificial living can take on quite extreme forms, particularly in countries in which the church suffers severe persecution and the pastor is the believers' only hope and comfort. In Bhutan, for instance, Christians are often evicted from their homes, along with their families, as a result of their outspokenly Christian lifestyle. Evicted families have nowhere to turn and often end up knocking on the pastor's door the same evening, carrying all their worldly possessions with them. Without a moment's hesitation, the pastor will take them into his home. Often, it takes weeks for the family to find a new home. The pastor who told me this summarised the hospitality of the pastors of Bhutan as follows: "They live a

sacrificial life.”

However moving this example may be, a measure of balance in these issues does seem appropriate to me. Your very first and highest calling is not the church, but your marriage and family. The congregation really does come second. Most pastors tend to give the church and the needs of church members first place, at the expense of spending time with their own family. This is not honouring to God. In the long run it will not strengthen the church either, as it may result in an overworked pastor with a disappointed or even embittered family. That's why the next characteristic Paul puts forward, managing your family well, is so intertwined with the previous ones.

This last characteristic mentioned by Paul in 1 Timothy 3 is quite remarkable: a pastor must be a competent educator. Both in **teaching** the church and in **managing** his family and children, he is an example to the congregation. This means that as a pastor you don't angrily impose your will, but rather you balance fairness with grace as you raise up your family and lead the church. You are attuned to the needs of others, which also means you lovingly provide clear boundaries and direction.

These are very practical guidelines offered us by Paul for the conduct a pastor should exhibit in his daily life.

Love

A third area Paul touches on in 1 Timothy 4:12 is love. The Greek word Paul uses here is 'agape', which means serving, or sacrificial, love. A pastor loves his church and will vouch for her.

This love does not develop automatically; in your own strength, you cannot love so many different people with so many different characters. However, the Bible speaks of an inner attitude from which this love springs up like water from a well. Paul mentions it in Philippians 2:5: “...*have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.*” This mindset, or attitude, makes you deeply aware of how much God

loves you, and of the fact that you are His beloved son or daughter, in whom He is well pleased. Once you realise this, once you realise Who you belong to and what riches you have already received in Christ, you will find room in your heart and life to consider others rather than living only for yourself. You will experience what Paul talks about a few verses back in Philippians 2: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others”* (verses 3-4). If this mindset of Jesus permeates the way in which you deal with people around you, they will start to notice and it will be a testimony to Jesus' love and an example to your church. It will enlarge your heart, making it big enough for many church members, and you will serve them a loving heart.

How this serving love operates in practice within the church is summarised by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 – a passage that applies to all believers, but that according to 1 Timothy 4:12 requires a special example from pastors. Here's how Paul sums it up: *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres”* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Again, there is a strong emphasis on not sticking up for yourself, being patient with others, bearing one another. If you want to be a servant leader, patience, forbearance and perseverance in relationships are indispensable. Every pastor runs out of patience now and again, and feels a powerful urge to give that brother or sister – maybe even the whole congregation – an earful. Those are the moments in which it is important for you as a pastor to read the words of 1 Corinthians 13, to meditate on them and to draw on your relationship with Jesus to put them into practice once again – not as some impossible assignment, but as the natural result of having the mindset of Christ. You don't have to force it, it's a gift from God's Spirit. Whoever reaches out for it will receive it.

Faith

The fourth area of Christian living in which as a pastor you are to set the example for the church is faith. What Paul means here is that a pastor must be firmly rooted in his faith in God. In 1 Timothy 3:6, he has already pointed out that a pastor should not be someone who has only just become a believer: *"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil."* If you are to show others the way to a life with God, it is important that you have travelled that road yourself, with all the trials and errors along the way. You can only be a guide if you have made the journey yourself. This doesn't mean you have to have experienced everything a person can experience in his or her walk with God. That would be impossible; God leads each of His children on a different and unique path. But it does mean that you know God well enough and are sufficiently familiar with His words and His ways to be able to help others understand what is happening in their lives with God.

Purity

The last area in which Paul appeals to young pastor Timothy to set an example is purity. He is not just talking about sexual purity, which we referred to earlier in the context of being faithful to one's wife. Here, Paul, is talking about self-control in general. It has to do with living purposefully. You're aware of your calling and have made everything subordinate to it; you want everything in your life to contribute to it. In 1 Corinthians 9:25, Paul uses the image of an athlete: *"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training."* So don't let anything come between you and God, or you and the church. Avoid giving offence by your words or actions, but instead make sure that in everything you do you keep your eyes on God's purpose for your life and the church. Then you will no longer be worried about earthly treasures, and the temporal, transitory things of this world will lose their hold on you. You will be in control of your natural impulses and desires, and equipped to serve God with your whole life.

In Matthew 5:8, Jesus says: *"Blessed are the pure in heart."* He's referring to the disciple who lives by what he professes to believe,

who has an undivided heart. It means you put into practice what you believe. If you say Jesus is everything to you, than your life shows that everything else takes second or third place. It's a matter of setting the right priorities. If you believe you're living in the end times, that the game is almost over, you'll focus on what really matters in life, not allowing yourself to be distracted by things that do not match with godly living. In Romans 13:13, Paul, thinking of the approaching second coming of Jesus, puts it like this: *"Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy."* If we control ourselves and concentrate on what really matters, we will be useful instruments. In 2 Timothy 2:21, Paul offers young pastor Timothy the following summary: *"Those who cleanse themselves (...) will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."* Every pastor must regularly examine himself or make confession to a confidante in order to remain pure in serving God and thus to be a useful instrument. The best of me for the Most High!

A living sign

Timothy, and with him every pastor, is given five very practical instructions on how to live a life that will be an example to his church. But how can you set an example as a pastor if you still have to learn and discover it all yourself? The amazing thing is that as a pastor you, too, have an example you can follow. If you want to know how to live with God as a believer and how to set an example to your church, fix your eyes on Jesus. He demonstrated what a life lived in accordance with God's will is like. And he gave us His Spirit to teach us.

The tasks of a pastor

Almost every pastor is busy. You have to be available for people all day and you can be called on in many ways. The strange thing is that even when you don't have church members on your doorstep or on the phone, your thoughts are incessantly turning to the church. Being a pastor means you're never finished. You can't shut the office door behind you at the end of the day and step out into another world: the church is always present. And if you're not being called on by a member, then there's always a meeting to chair, a Bible study to prepare, or next Sunday's sermon that you ought to be starting on.

Expectations

Regardless of the size of your congregation, perhaps the toughest part of being a pastor is the fact that church members have so many different expectations. Every congregation is a colourful blend of unique individuals, often with totally different wishes. And each one expects the pastor to be there for him or her in good times and in bad – especially if there is a strong bond. They assume you will have time for them, think along with them, pray with them. They expect you to understand their desires and disappointments, including those related to church life. Sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, people try to draw you into their 'camp', ignoring the fact that as a pastor you should remain above the various groups that exist within every church. On top of all this, you need quiet time as a pastor to pray, study and meditate, personally, and as a part of your sermon or Bible study preparation. So although a pastor can only pass on what he has first received in his quiet time with God, he is often so busy that real quiet time is hard to come by.

It's no wonder that many pastors feel permanently over-stretched and spiritually drained. This is not just bad for them and for their families, it's also detrimental to the church. Most pastors realise this, but in many cases they have been stuck in certain working and living patterns within the church for a long time and do not know how to break out. The work has to be done, it's all equally important, you

can't just leave people in the lurch. And if you don't do the job, who will? You might say most pastors suffer from the 'Martha syndrome'.

Martha

Martha is the woman who had to take care of the temporary house church of Jesus and His disciples – and got pretty frustrated in the doing. Her story is recounted in Luke 10:38-42. Jesus is passing through with His disciples, and probably quite a few others. On arrival in Bethany, Martha graciously welcomes them into her home and sets about making arrangements for this unexpected gathering. There's nothing she'd rather do than serve Jesus and His 'church'. While Jesus speaks, the disciples listen. Mary, Martha's sister, also sits at His feet. But what about Martha? We read that *“Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made”* (verse 40).

Martha strongly resembles a busy pastor who, like her, is totally absorbed in serving Jesus and ministering to His church. Somebody has to do it, right? At the same time, she's not doing it very wholeheartedly anymore, as we can see from her indignant complaint to Jesus: *“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?”* (verse 40). As a pastor, you often work alone. This can frustrate you deep down inside. If it does, you may start complaining inwardly that the church is sitting back and enjoying itself, while you seem to be doing all the serving. If this is your story, you'll find the reply Jesus offers to Martha's complaint rather confronting. *“Martha, Martha,”* the Lord answered, *“you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one”* (verse 41-42).

The worry and fuss of a pastor over his congregation is completely unnecessary, according to Jesus. What is truly necessary, especially for busy pastors, is, before all else, to do 'the one thing needed', that is, to sit at the feet of Jesus. So before doing anything at all in the church as a pastor, begin your day by sitting at the feet of your Lord. There you will receive everything you need for another day of serving the church. You'll receive His love and forgiveness, comfort and encouragement, and the power of His Spirit. Then the words

spoken by Jesus in Matthew 6:33 will become true for you: *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

The common denominator in my conversations with pastors in the Suffering Church is that they all have to do everything for their congregation. They provide spiritual leadership, preach, do visitation work, often get called at night by people whose troubles are keeping them awake. In Pakistan, many believers consider the pastor to be a kind of father figure, in Egypt he is seen as a husband and in Bhutan they expect him to always sacrifice everything for them. In these countries, such leadership patterns tend to be the norm in society and therefore they are easily copied within the church. It can be very difficult to change them.

Jethro's advice

In the Bible, we encounter quite of a few bustling pastors. The most famous of them all is Moses, who led the people out of Egypt and set out to guide this huge congregation across the desert to the promised land. He was a shepherd guiding his flock through some very rough circumstances. Many pastors will recognise this. Moses was as busy as a beaver leading and serving all those people God had entrusted to his care.

We read in Exodus 18 that one day Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came to visit him in the wilderness, where he was camped 'near the mountain of God'. They talked for a while and the next day Jethro observed Moses at work as the pastor of the people. *“...they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, “What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening? (...) What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone”* (Exodus 18: 13-14,17-18).

Blessed is the pastor who meets a counsellor like Jethro! Someone who sees you at work and honestly shares his observations with you. Blessed is the pastor who has an elder board or church council that quotes these words of Jethro. Blessed is the pastor whose wife, children, relatives or friends are prepared to say things like this to him. An overly busy pastor is not a blessing – not to himself, not to the church and not to God.

Jethro goes on to affirm that all that work does indeed have to be performed. There's nothing wrong with the tasks in themselves, they lie at the very heart of community life. But if all the work rests on the shoulders of one individual, something is wrong. That's why Jethro gives Moses a wise piece of advice that to this day applies to pastors all over the world. He appeals to him to divide the work more evenly. He identifies the core activities to which a pastor must restrict himself. He points out which tasks a pastor must perform himself and which can be delegated to other gifted members of the community. The pastor's most important assignment is to keep a sharp eye on these core responsibilities and to make sure he has enough time and energy to fulfil them properly.

In his summary of Moses' core responsibilities, Jethro puts forward five tasks a pastor must perform. In verse 19-22, he says: *“You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves.”*

Five core responsibilities

Jethro offers a crystal-clear priority list for pastors. These are the five core responsibilities he identifies:

The first is intercession for the congregation: *“You must be the*

people's representative before God." A good pastor is always a praying pastor. We saw in Chapter 3 that it is not good for a pastor to spend the whole day among people, but rather that he must daily commend the people to God. After all, it's not the pastor who offers comfort, support or healing, but God's Spirit; the pastor's first task is to carry the needs of the people to God in prayer. Blessed is the church whose pastor doesn't spend all his time knocking on people's doors, but who instead goes to the inner room to plead for them with God. Obviously, as a pastor you have to know what's going on among your congregation and be familiar with the issues people are facing, but rather than constantly visiting them in their homes, it is better for you to return to your own home and represent them before God, praying fervently and confidently for them. So the pastor's first core responsibility is intercession.

The second task, according to Jethro, is to *"teach them God's decrees and instructions."* This is the task of proclaiming the Word spoken by God, first through Moses, later through the prophets, evangelists and apostles. The word used here for teaching suggests urgency. It is a matter of great importance. When you proclaim the Word, you're not just telling stories; you're dealing with the choice between eternal salvation and eternal damnation and you must make this clear. The preaching of God's Word is the church's heartbeat. We gather together to listen to what God wants to teach us about who He is, how Jesus Christ has brought us salvation, and how He wants us to live with Him. Instil the Word of God in the people, Jethro says. Paul offers Timothy similar advice when he urges him to keep proclaiming God's Word. In 2 Timothy 4:2, he says: *"Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season..."* So the second core responsibility of a pastor, after prayer, is to proclaim the Gospel. In the second book in the Jethro Series, 'Passion for Preaching', we will deal with this topic more extensively.

The third task Jethro mentions is to *"show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave."* This is all about the practical application in daily life of what has been preached. This aspect of

teaching is a vital part of church life. It should be aimed at showing believers how the Biblical message proclaimed among them is designed to direct, change and renew our lives. How does the sermon you heard affect the way you live with God, with your fellow man and with yourself? Teaching takes preaching a step further by seeking a practical application for the church. Through teaching, the proclaimed Word can be applied to specific situations, brought nearer, made more practical.

This teaching also implies systematic coverage of the whole of Scripture. You can use different passages of Scripture to clearly outline themes and principles, highlighting the key truths and enabling church members to really apply them in day-to-day life. In 'the Great Commission' in Matthew 28, Jesus mentions this quite emphatically: *"and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"* (verse 20). Preaching and teaching cannot do without each other, they complement each other, draw the church together and bring the believer nearer to God. So in addition to praying and preaching, the pastor is also responsible for the spiritual development of the church through systematic, practical teaching.

The fourth aspect of church life for which Moses is responsible, Jethro says, is dealing with disputes among the people: *"...have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves"* (Exodus 18:22). Tensions and troubles are bound to occur within a group of people journeying through the desert together. Most of Moses' pastoral work consisted of settling disputes. Pastoral counselling – which largely consists of comforting, encouraging and visiting people – is a core responsibility of every pastor. It is often the most visible aspect of a pastor's job. Whenever your church members face a personal crisis or a relational conflict, you're there. You encourage, comfort, share words from the Bible, pray with your people. But another necessary part of your pastoral work is admonishing and correcting people, with the Bible in your hand, or condemning wrong situations or sinful patterns.

A good shepherd will lift up the weary or wounded sheep and carry it

a while, leaning on his rod and his staff. But he uses that same rod and staff to bring straying sheep back to the flock, or to goad them onto the right path. A real pastor is concerned with the wellbeing of his people and will do whatever it takes to draw them near to Jesus and to keep them there. This is what pastoral work is all about. And it is one of the core responsibilities of every pastor.

The fifth piece of advice Jethro offers deals with the question of how to provide leadership to a bustling, dynamic group of people. Jethro here offers Moses a mini-course on church management. Find competent, devout, reliable men and make them responsible for the wellbeing of larger and smaller groups within the church. *“Select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens”* (Exodus 18:21). In other words, Jethro advises Moses to divide the people into smaller units and to appoint pastoral workers for each one. Then the people will know who they can go to, the pastoral workers will have clearly defined responsibilities, and Moses will no longer have to deal with all those issues on his own. We see, then, that organising the church efficiently is another core responsibility of the pastor. Don't do everything yourself, but appoint people who are able and willing to share in the responsibility. Essentially, this is about team-based leadership: Moses is to deal with the most difficult cases himself, while all other concerns and questions can be taken to the group pastors. In this way, the pastor does not get overworked, the gifts of other church members will be put to good use, and the work will not be done reluctantly but in gratitude for the opportunity to work together to the glory of God.

Jethro offers pastors a priority list outlining five clear tasks. The beautiful thing is that this same list reappears in Acts 6. After the first day of Pentecost, the apostles soon were so busy leading the rapidly growing church and coping with an increasing range of material demands that they began to neglect their primary responsibilities. Then, in verses 3-4, they intervened: *“Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and*

wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” The apostles cut back their core responsibilities even further than Jethro does in his advice to Moses. They said their task was to pray and to administer the Word of God. Clearly, those two tasks rank right at the top of the pastor's priority list, both in the Old and the New Testament.

Leaving a trail

In order to be this focussed in your work, you will have to make firm decisions and stick to them consistently. Don't take your cues from the expectations of church members, but from your Biblical assignment. This calls for vision – and the courage to put that vision into practice. But as you do these things, you'll begin to see things happening in the church. You'll be working purposefully, rather than rushing around putting out fires. An experienced and wise pastor summed up his work in the church as follows: don't just wear out your shoes, leave a trail.

Pitfalls for pastors

Temptations

Like any other believer, a pastor knows temptation: sinful thoughts and feelings that well up from the depths of our soul and lure us away from God. As James puts it: “...each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed” (James 1:14). Everyone faces temptations. Christians can battle and overcome them in the name and the power of Jesus. Typical examples include material temptations, sexual temptations, the temptations of self-centredness and so on. We've already looked at some of them in Chapter 5, when we discussed the pastor's daily life. Like other believers, a pastor is familiar with these dangers. Paul exhorts the young pastor Timothy to be an example right there in those tough areas of life. Show others, he says, how to deal with such temptations as a Christian.

In addition to the common dangers every Christian faces, a pastor has to cope with several other risks that are part and parcel of his ministry. Throughout church history quite a few different lists have been drawn up, varying from 'gold, girl's and glory' to lengthy catalogues of up to fifteen possible threats to a pastor's spiritual wellbeing. In this chapter, we will focus on five pitfalls. I have based this selection on my own experience, conversations with colleagues, and books and articles I've read on this topic down the years. These are the five pitfalls we'll be looking at: pride as opposed to gratitude, ruling as opposed to serving, self-interest as opposed to the interest of the church, mediocrity as opposed to zeal, pessimism as opposed to faith.

Pride

Let's face it: it's quite something to stand up in front of a group of people every Sunday whose eyes and ears are trained on you; to regularly be told that your sermon has been such a help to someone; that your visit was such an encouragement; that your efforts are so appreciated; and so on. The danger of receiving praise as a pastor is

that – unconsciously, of course – you become proud of what you do and who you are. And you actually believe you have good reason to feel that way, because, after all, you're the one everyone relies on all the time. Rarely does a church member appeal to you in vain. You work hard for God and for your fellow believers. And unintentionally, you adopt an air of subtle pride. You may not want to face it, you may not readily admit that a thing like pride smoulders deep within you, but it is a very real pitfall.

Pride always has to do with seeking and enjoying appreciation. This can be a healthy tendency, as long as you welcome people's appreciation for your work, or your personality, without depending on it. But especially if you hold a central position in your community, the church's simple appreciation for what you do can quickly grow into an unhealthy admiration, or even idolisation. The pastor can start to take on a more central role than his Lord. And that is a serious sin.

Pride is the desire to be important. Pride is a feeling that you can do things better than others can, which soon leads to a hidden conviction that in some ways you actually are better than others. Pride is what we see in Peter, when he declares: *"Even if all fall away, I will not"* (Mark 14:29). Ever since the Fall of man, pride has been the root of evil. It was pride, after all, that caused the fall of Adam and Eve in paradise: they wanted to be more and better. The opposite of pride is gratitude. A proud person views everything that is going well in church and in his own life as a personal success; a grateful person realises that all good things are the result of God's blessing and grace.

That's exactly why pride is so dangerous: it keeps you away from the life based on grace. Pride creeps in subtly. Pride is a warning signal that as a pastor you are no longer living in intimate fellowship with your Lord. You start to behave as if you did it all yourself. The more you are at the centre of attention, the greater this pitfall becomes. And if you claim to be immune to the disease of pride, chances are you're already infected. Pride usually comes disguised as false

modesty. You brush off compliments, pretending to be modest, but on the inside you're burning with pride. Anyone who knows God and himself just a little bit, will realise more and more that we must join in Jesus' confession: *"Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing..."* (John 5:19). Rather than fuelling your pride, this makes you grateful. The words of David in Psalm 19:13 have always been my personal prayer, again and again: *"Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression"* (New King James Version).

Ruling

A pastor is a servant. He lives to serve God and his whole manner of leading should express this. He is a servant leader. This means that in everything your aim is to honour God and to build up the church. Whatever is wholesome for the church, whatever will encourage members and help them to grow and blossom in their relationships with God and with each other comes first in everything you do and don't do. That's how it is meant to be. And that's how many pastors begin their assignment. But all too often we slip back into old, natural leadership patterns of the kind we see in the world around us. Before you know it, your leadership as a pastor can harden into dominance over the church. Jesus warns against this in Matthew 20, when the wife of Zebedee brings her two sons to Him. They're disciples of Jesus and she asks Jesus to allow them to sit at his right and left hand in His Kingdom. She wants her sons to rule on the throne with Jesus. When the other disciples hear about her request, they are indignant. This is how Jesus responds: *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:25-28).

Jesus makes it clear that in the world it is normal for leaders to oppress their subjects and to abuse power. Every leader has a

tendency to give his own will and interests first place. The mother's request is evidence that it even happens in the Kingdom. But Jesus holds out a clear standard for all those in leadership positions within the church of Christ. Leadership, as he portrays it, is about serving. If you want to be first, He says, you must become everyone's servant. That was His own mission when he came to earth: *"...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..."* (verse 28). With this same assignment He sends pastors off into the church. Your assignment is very simple: serve.

Servant leadership is characterised by listening and empathising. What's going on in people's lives, what drives them, what do they need, how can they grow in faith, how can this church blossom to the glory of Christ? These are the big questions a servant leader is occupied with.

Being a servant leader also means you want to avoid running a one-man show. Leadership is a shared responsibility, and although you may often be the initiator, you never want to do it all on your own. You can't. Shared leadership will prevent a pastor from becoming a ruler. Together with the elders and other gifted believers, you serve the church by jointly providing leadership. As a pastor, you have a specific leadership role, but you're never above others within the church. Your authority is never based on power, but on serving God and the church, under the guidance of the Word and the Spirit.

Never forget that serving can slowly change into ruling. Often, you won't notice the change yourself. But your congregation will. By the time they do, however, it may be too late, as you will no longer be open to correction, to fundamental questions about your functioning, to criticism. Make sure you are always accountable and correctible. Be aware that without knowing it you might step into the pitfall of pride; accountability and honesty are vital. Regular evaluation of your approach to leadership with the elders will prevent your servanthood from turning into dominance. Remember that the norm for all our leadership is always Jesus. We lead with Him, in His name and for Him; if He says He didn't come to be served but to serve, how much more should we apply that to ourselves as pastors?

Self-interest

Right next to the pitfall of ruling lies another pitfall: self-interest. The pitfall of self-interest is all about the risk of developing an antennae for people you might be able to use, situations you may be able to take advantage of, decisions that may benefit your position sometime in the future. It is very tempting for any pastor to show a lot of interest in the people who appreciate you most. You know exactly which strings to pull to make sure others are reminded of how faithful and diligent you are.

Like most other folk, pastors can easily be impressed by successful or influential church members. Sometimes there's an element of fear in this, because you know that if a prominent member starts to criticise you, you're in for a rough time. Giving in to these feelings means you're placing your own selfish interests before those of others, or of the church as a whole. If the most successful or vocal church members get all the attention and the pastor indulges in upper crust friendships, the more vulnerable and unassuming church members will lose out.

Most of a pastor's work is hidden from the public eye. If appreciation and recognition are what you're after, you won't keep up this 'invisible' work for very long; you'll soon be searching for ways to be praised again.

Whenever self-interest becomes a pastor's underlying motive, God and the church end up being short- changed. The glory of God is replaced by the pastor's status as the main focus. The pastor's position, or material prospects, begin to take centre stage, to the neglect of the growth and wellbeing of the congregation.

Paul speaks plainly about the pitfall of self-interest in Philippians 2: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others”* (verses 3-4). Then he goes on to prescribe the best medicine available against self-centred living and working: *“In your relationships with one*

another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (verse 5). That is the secret to the right way of living and working. The more you realise what the mindset of Jesus is and how He gave up all power and glory in order to save you, the more you'll learn to do the same for others. A self-centred life makes you a slave to your own selfish interests and ambitions. But if you allow Jesus Christ to guide you in these things, you will experience the freedom that comes with living in genuine love for the people around you. Then you will no longer be focused on personal gain, but instead you'll learn to enjoy loving and serving others. It is the freedom experienced by every child of God who has heard these words: “...everything I have is yours” (Luke 15:31). The more you realise how much God loves you, the less dependent you'll be on the praise of people, and the freer you'll be to really be there for whoever needs you.

The pitfall of self-interest is recognised in the Suffering Church as well. For example, for a pastor living under constant financial pressure it may be tempting to visit wealthier church members, who are more likely to give financial or material gifts. A pastor in Egypt told me pastors sometimes indeed make visits to church members in hopes of receiving a gift of some sort. Obviously, their motive is not right. But if you have a family to support and your salary is barely enough for you to survive on, this kind of behaviour is quite understandable. There is a responsibility here for the congregation as a whole to make sure the pastor is spared from spending much of his time and energy on scraping for a living.

Mediocrity

A pastor works hard. He is more or less the engine of the church. Particularly in situations where there is a lot of groundwork and building to do, this can be very fulfilling. You get to watch the church grow, you see more and more believers finding their niche. You are constantly challenged to pray for the church, to think about it and to invest all your abilities and creativity in building it up. But as the church begins to stabilise, the groundwork has been done and fixed patterns begin to be established, you may be tempted to start taking

things a little easier. The church is generally running smoothly, all you have to do is give a little extra push or pull now and again, but apart from that it's plain sailing. You begin to be content with more of the same. As long as nothing really nasty or out-of-the-box happens, you're quite content. The longing for growth and dynamism you had at first gradually makes way for a longing for rest and stability. Unconsciously, you've shifted your focus from expansion and renewal to merely minding the shop. No pastor starts out like this, but many end this way. They're no longer on fire, passionate about working in God's Kingdom; their calling has become a job.

What we've described here is no different from what Jesus describes in Matthew 25:14-30, in the parable of the talents, or bags of gold. A master going on a journey entrusts all his wealth to his servants, giving each one the amount he can handle. None of them is given a burden heavier than he can bear. Two of the three servants immediately set about putting their money to work and both manage to double the amount entrusted to them. They're committed and unmistakably passionate about doubling their wealth, because it belongs to the master. Their whole approach exudes love for their master. They give him their very best. On his return, they each offer him a double amount and the master commends them by saying: *"Well done, good and faithful servant!"* (verses 21 and 23). The third servant has a different attitude altogether. His plan is to 'mind the shop' and he hides his one bag of gold in a hole in the ground. It belongs to his master, after all, so it has to be guarded carefully and shouldn't be put at risk. Essentially, this servant is trying to secure his own safety. When the master returns, he's very angry with this servant, calling him 'wicked' and 'lazy' (verse 26). The first two considered their master's interests, the third guarded his own.

Mediocrity is a form of cowardice. If we stop taking initiatives in church and seek to keep things the way they are, if we're content with the status quo, we're hiding our master's bag of gold in a hole in the ground. We need a fresh awareness of the fact that what has been entrusted to us belongs to our Master. It's bad enough to allow

your own possessions to rust away, or to squander them, but doing God's work half-heartedly will hinder the advancement of the Kingdom and keep people from being saved. That's why the master in the parable, like the Lord in heaven, is so angry with the third servant.

To all those burned out pastors and half-hearted workers in the Kingdom, I'd like to hold out Paul's words as an encouragement: *"So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad"* (2 Corinthians 5:9,10).

Pessimism

The last pitfall to be discussed here is the pitfall of pessimism. Whereas mediocrity is really your own fault as a pastor, pessimism can sometimes just assault you. You start out with good courage, longing for positive experiences and developments in the church that will glorify God, but you see so few results. Is there any point, am I doing something wrong, am I really cut out for this work, does anything really happen when I preach? Pessimism is one of Satan's favourite tools in discouraging and paralysing pastors. If you start looking for results, measuring and weighing them in the balance, you may very easily step into this pitfall. You might also call it the pitfall of disbelief. You give up believing that God really is at work, you give up believing in the power of the Spirit and of the Word, in God's promises to the church.

It's vital to realise that as a pastor you are not responsible for the results, but that God has promised to bless. Paul puts it this way: *"So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow"* (1 Corinthians 3:7).

Especially when you feel like giving up, it is important to share your heart, honestly and openly, with a few trusted people. Many pastors are ashamed of their negative feelings and keep them to themselves

for a long time. Things will get better some time, they tell themselves; don't be a weakling, just press on, the fire will return. It often does eventually, but getting there is a long and lonely road and 'the wound is dressed as though it were not serious'. Which probably means it won't be too long before the next wave of depression comes rolling in. Only if you have the courage to be vulnerable, to ask for help and to bite the bullet are you likely to experience real recovery.

A church leader in Iraq spoke to me about what he called the 'fatalism' of most Iraqis, including many pastors. They've given up believing in the restoration of their country and the rebuilding of the church. The constant struggle and the tensions have caused a deep discouragement, and all you can do as a pastor is try and plod on as inconspicuously as possible. Many hardly even believe the church of Christ will survive in Iraq. When I asked my friend about his own feelings, he exclaimed: "There is still hope! God is a God of hope. I, too, see how tough things have become and how much goes wrong in our society and our churches, but I believe in a God who daily performs miracles and that gives me hope." Then he went on to explain the difference between optimism and hopefulness. Optimism, he said, is based on money and power. You believe things will improve, because you have the resources and possibilities to achieve it. Hope is what's left when you've run out of resources and possibilities, but you do know that God is with you, that He is at work in the toughest of circumstances. "A person who is hopeful, is never alone", he said, "because he has aligned himself with God."

What every church needs, I learned from this brother, is not an optimistic pastor, but a hopeful pastor!

In his book 'Christ-driven Ministry', Ajith Fernando, the leader of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka, also writes about discouraged pastors, advocating what he calls 'a theology of groaning'. He does this on the basis of Romans 8:23, where Paul says: "...we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly

for our adoption to sonship.” In church we sometimes pretend to be happy and joyful – we're children of God, after all! But the Bible shows us that hard times and difficult situations, in which we really reach the end of our tether, are part of living with God and that we must be honest with God and with one another about these things. This is what the Bible calls groaning, and Paul says those who have received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will experience it, too. In fact, the Spirit Himself groans along with us as he intercedes for us (Romans 8:26).

What matters, says Fernando, is that we learn to distinguish between groaning and grumbling. Groaning is always directed to God and is, therefore, full of hope and expectation. Grumbling is succumbing to self-pity and throwing the towel in the ring. If as a pastor you feel a wave of pessimism coming your way, don't try to ignore it, instead express your groanings to God with the help of the Spirit, knowing that His power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Persevering as a pastor

Pastoring a church is wonderful work. It's an immense privilege. Yet at the same time it takes everything out of you. As you nourish and serve others, you're constantly giving out. Time and again, the intensity of your emotional and spiritual engagement reaches peak levels. You don't churn out sermons at the drop of a hat. You don't offhandedly visit a seriously ill brother or sister. You don't listen to a couple plagued by marital problems with just half an ear. You don't shrug off the problems shared with you by a young person. You listen, you empathise, you pray. You make thorough preparations for the next meeting, Bible study or sermon. And at the end of the day, you're often tired, spiritually drained. You can keep it up for quite a while, but if there's no compensation one way or another, you'll eventually hit the wall. Sooner or later, your tank will run dry.

Exhaustion is not the only reason why pastors are sometimes forced to quit. Sometimes it's the sheer monotony of the work. If you're plodding on with the usual counselling sessions, meetings and sermons without very much to show for it – without seeing significant change in the church or special things happening in people's lives – you can get very discouraged. So both an overdose and a lack of excitement in church can deplete your resources as a pastor, leaving you so powerless and demoralised you hardly know how to continue. What should you do in a situation like that?

In this chapter, we're going to look at five sources from which you will be able to draw new inspiration and strength in your life and work as a pastor. No doubt others could be mentioned, but to me these five stand out.

Your calling

The first source is your calling, which we discussed at the beginning of this book. Particularly at a time when your motivation is ebbing away and the ministry has all but lost its appeal, it's important not to focus on whether or not you're having a good time. You're not in this

church doing this work for the fun of it, but because God called you to serve Him here. So in essence, this source takes you back to God Himself. Tapping into this source means returning to your Sender. Share your reluctance, your discontent or your weariness with God and ask Him to reconfirm your calling. Ask God to restore, nourish and renew your first love for Him and His church.

Apart from reminding you of your calling, going back to this source also calls on you to deliberately step out again in obedience to that call. It means going back to obeying God's command. Look what happened to Elijah. In 1 Kings 19, he was so exhausted and depressed, he felt like quitting. But God led him back to the source. On Mount Horeb, Elijah's source of renewal turned out to be God's quiet presence. In the quietness of a gentle whisper, God asked Elijah: *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* (verse 13). Elijah took the opportunity to utter his complaint to God. The only answer he got was that he must 'go back' to work – but everything had changed. Once again Elijah knew, more than ever before, that God was with him.

Particularly when you're fed up, you may go to God and return to the source of your calling. But realise that He will most likely put you right back to work; you'll have no other option than to obey. But you'll also discover that this is the best remedy for weary pastors. Keep at it, but remember Who is with you.

Your destiny

A second source to draw strength from is our destiny: in addition to going back to where it all began, we must also regularly direct our attention towards the final goal, our future. A pastor is not someone who presses on in naïve optimism, rather his work is based on the Biblical hope that the promised breakthrough of God's Kingdom will one day be fulfilled.

The ultimate goal we're all moving towards is the second coming of Christ, that day when the Master will return and ask each of his servants what they did with his wealth. Did you hide it or double it?

(Matthew 25:14-28). On that day, every servant who has made the most of what God entrusted to him or her, will be invited to join the master's feast. Their work will be rewarded. Here and now you may see few results, but again and again Jesus emphasises that your reward in heaven will be great. If you're faithful in small things here on earth, great things will be entrusted to you in the Kingdom. Aim for the prize promised you at the end of the race, the crown of victory. There is no greater joy than one day to be with Jesus in His Kingdom, surrounded by people you led to Him. That is our future, the promise we're building on. Losing sight of this prospect and hope is a recipe for discouragement. But keep looking ahead and you'll be able to persevere.

Taking a retreat

The third source you can draw from in order to persevere as a pastor is the quietness of retreat. The word retreat originally means 'to draw back'. A retreat is a shorter or longer period in which you withdraw to a place of seclusion in order to find rest and to refocus. Busy pastors need this more urgently than they often realise. The benefits of a retreat are among others:

- First of all, you need quietness and rest to reaffirm that your spiritual life with God is the absolute top priority in your life. Reading the Bible and praying without interruption will give you new strength.
- Secondly, a retreat will help you slow down your pace of living. Sometimes, the pace can be so high that you can't stop, you just keep rushing on from one thing to the next. It becomes a pattern that has you so firmly in its grip that you can't even find rest in God (Psalm 62).
- The third advantage of a retreat is that in quietness, both outward and inward, you will hear and learn to recognise God's voice again. God does not shout, He whispers in your ear to express His love and His will (Matthew 10:27).

- The fourth way in which you will benefit from a retreat is that it will deliver you from the tyranny of a busy schedule. Your diary and workload can be brutal slave drivers. In many churches a busy pastor is considered a good thing, because it means he's really there for the people. This is a dangerous mistake. We already saw in Chapter 5 that rushing about to please church members is not what you've been called to do.
- The fifth advantage of taking time out for quietness and solitude is that in the midst of many challenges and changes you will rediscover your source of strength and peace. Psalm 73 contains a long complaint by the poet about the intense pressure he is experiencing. Then he retreats, as it were, turning to God, and once again he finds peace in the realisation of what his life really centres on: *"Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel"* (Psalm 73:23).

There are different ways of taking time out for quietness and rest. You can retreat to a quiet place or a conference for a few days. But you can also plan a moment of quiet withdrawal every day or every week, in which you deliberately step back from the hustle and bustle to be quiet and to spend time with God. I like to spend a morning or afternoon walking in the forest once every week. There I can be quiet before God, share with Him what's on my heart and receive new strength from Him. Usually, I take my notes for next Sunday's sermon along, and in the silence of nature, God gives me inspiration and encouragement to preach His Word. Without this weekly retreat I would never survive as a pastor!

To many pastors in the Suffering Church, this issue poses a problem. They are under so much pressure from so many sides, as well as being threatened, that their families invariably suffer. Older pastors tend to involve their wives by giving them responsibilities in the church. Younger pastors with children have a particularly hard time.

A Pakistani pastor spoke to me about this, just after he'd been arrested and thoroughly interrogated. His thoughts immediately turned to his family and he wondered how they would handle the news, how frightened they'd be. He prayed for them. When he got home, his children, some of whom were studying abroad, said that this incident strengthened their resolve to return to Pakistan and support the church. The pressures faced by a pastor can disrupt family life, but they can also become a source of new inspiration.

Studying

The fourth source I'd like to mention is studying. This may not be the first thing that comes to your mind if you're thinking about refreshment, but taking extra time out to study and to gain new knowledge, skills and insights will definitely inspire you. If you stop studying because you're too busy, your development will come to a standstill. You'll find yourself constantly drawing on the same old reservoir of answers and options. Before you know it, that reservoir will dry up.

Studying means thoughtfully examining the Bible in the first place, so that rather than becoming superficial, what you have to say about God will be deeply rooted in God's Word. This will add depth to your own spiritual life as well as to your work in the church. Next, it's important to read up, if you can, on what church leaders in other parts of the world and during other periods of history have written on topics you're looking into. Remember, we're not the first and we won't be the last to be facing such issues. Try to gain a broad perspective on the themes you're faced with as a pastor, so that you will develop a balanced and informed personal view.

A prominent pastor in Iraq told me he tries to spend five hours a day studying, so that in addition to rediscovering known treasures he may dig up new ones from the depths of God's Word and from the history of the church. Studying also helps him to know how to handle the constantly changing circumstances and challenges his church is confronted with.

The founder of Open Doors, Brother Andrew, always makes sure he's working through several study books at the same time – in addition to reading the Bible and a number of daily devotionals. When I asked him why does this, he told me: That way my backpack is always full, so that whenever and wherever the opportunity arises I can share or equip others.

Studying sharpens the mind, makes you alert, and adds new dimensions to your walk with God and with the people around you. It keeps your mind fresh, calling on gifts you may not use in your daily work in church.

Make sure that in addition to studying the Bible, you also read up on what is going on in the world around you. This will help you understand the times. It will also make you more familiar with other religions and value systems, so that you can equip church members in relating to those outside the church.

Studying is also necessary for providing your preaching and teaching with a firm apologetic basis. Make sure you can intelligently join in debates and that you can offer solid answers to questions directed at you by church members as well as outsiders.

It's good to note that there are different ways of studying. Some read books and articles, others prefer to attend conferences, seminars and training programmes when they can. Both approaches can help you come to grips with the latest information in a given field.

Fellowship with colleagues

The fifth source you can draw from in order to keep going as a pastor is regular contact with other pastors. Talking with colleagues who are in the same situation as you are can be immensely encouraging. Sharing your joys and sorrows will really cheer you up as a pastor; you'll experience the relief and the pleasure of realising you're not the only one facing certain issues. Sometimes, being with colleagues means you can have a good laugh about situations you've encountered, as they help you put things in perspective and remind you that laughter is easier in company. Sometimes they may be able to offer helpful advice or practical support. Pastors with more

experience may be able to counsel you. You'll also find that fellow pastors can challenge you more honestly than most church members would. Fellowship between pastors potentially can go further, because you're both in the same battlefield.

You cannot take the wholesome effects of fellowship with colleagues for granted, however. You will only experience them if you're prepared to be open and honest with each other, rather than keeping up appearances. Often the latter is precisely what we do – to our own loss. Joined together in the service of our crucified Lord, we needn't be ashamed or embarrassed of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. If we share from heart to heart, we can encourage and strengthen one another at that level, too. It will give us the renewed vitality we need to continue.

A church leader in Pakistan told me that within his denomination every pastor is required to seek out a senior pastor and to keep in touch with him intensively. The senior pastor does not only offer advice in practical affairs, but also acts as a kind of confessor. Juniors can share everything with their senior pastor, who will listen and counsel them so that they remain standing, close to God, an exemplary Christian leader in the midst of their congregation. A senior pastor, of course, must be honest and reliable and possess moral authority. This arrangement helps pastors in Pakistan to persevere.

As we have seen, there are different sources we can tap into when as pastors we're feeling less than equal to the task. It makes good sense, of course, to make these sources a regular part of your pastorship and not just to use them in hard times. That way you can keep yourself from getting overworked or exhausted.

Part 2

Passion for preaching

Part 2: Passion for preaching

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Introduction to part 2

Passion for preaching

The second advice Jethro gives his son-in-law Moses is: *“Teach them the decrees and laws”*. In our contemporary language this means: preach to them the Word of God. Teaching and preaching are intertwined in the Bible and so Moses has the task of preaching. Today preaching is seen as one of the main tasks of a pastor. When the congregation has gathered to worship and listen to the Word of God, the preacher is there to explain and apply God's words to His people. In preaching, God's words as they are written down in the Bible come alive. In order to preach biblically and relevantly, the pastor needs to dig deep into the Word, bring it close to the hearts and lives of the people. He has to make sure that the Word of the Lord has touched his own heart as well. This part will show you how to do so.

Preaching is a privilege

Everyone who is called to preach is privileged. Those who are called to translate God's thoughts into human language have a unique relationship with both God and people. You listen very intently to what God has to say in his Word and you work hard to make it understandable so that you can effectively reach the people with that word - the Gospel.

When you preach the Word you are privileged because you are being used by God to fulfil His plan of saving sinners and building His Kingdom. And that creates a tension between the urgency of 'the now' and the reality of eternity. Everything you say and do has eternal value and can be used by God's Spirit to transform people into His children. That applies not only to those who hear God's message, but also to you. You preach the Gospel to the congregation, but you are the first to hear it. Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:6: 'The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops.' When preparing the sermon you are the first to experience the amazement, the joy, the nearness of Christ. You are also the first to experience perhaps God's reproof, or reproach – sometimes what He has to say to us can be hard.

Way of life

Preaching is not something you do 'casually' or as a 'part time job'. Preaching is a way of life. It demands all of you. It demands your intellect as you search for the meaning of a part of Scripture. It demands your wisdom as you consider how people will respond to your message on Sunday. It demands your own heartfelt response to what God is saying - how does it touch you? It demands the full surrender of your soul so that you can be used by God's Spirit.

Preaching is a privilege because it demands your body, heart and soul for the Kingdom. It makes you sensitive to what is happening in yourself, in the people around you and in society. All that you hear, see and experience will be placed in the light of that particular

passage from the Bible you use next Sunday. Preaching is a privilege as it encourages you to live consciously in the presence of God. You have to take time to concentrate on God and His Word, which nourishes you spiritually.

Preaching is also a privilege because you are relying on God's promise. It is unpredictable. You put a lot of time and energy into preparing and delivering it. You long for something to really happen between God and the people through your preaching, but you cannot force it to happen. You try to fulfil all the conditions, but yet as a preacher, you know it is not up to you to light a flame in the hearts of the people. You are between God and people - a place of mystery and a place which is the domain of God's Spirit. It's here that the words of Jesus in John 3:8 are so true: *'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.'* As a preacher you can take the message to the hearts of the people, but only God's Spirit can take it *into* their hearts.

In John 3:29 John the Baptist underlines this as he talks about how the friend of the bridegroom rejoices in the voice of the bridegroom. He responds with these words to the comment of his disciples that Jesus draws more people than John does. He answers them by talking about the task of the 'friend of the bridegroom'. In those days this 'friend of the bridegroom' had an important task. It is he who approaches the bride and asks her if she will marry his friend. If the answer is 'yes' he then makes all the arrangements for the wedding, brings them together and guides them even into their wedding night, but only as far as the door to the bedroom! He has no part in what happens after that – that is between the bride and the bridegroom – his job is finished. But the custom in these days was that the bridegroom would let his friend know that everything was alright, meaning that his bride was still a virgin, by a shout of joy. The friend waited for this shout and then went away from the door. That is what John means by 'rejoice in the voice of the bridegroom'. It's the joy of knowing that it is alright between the two of them.

It is the same for you as a preacher. You rejoice in the love God has for the people, you do all that you can to bring God and your people together, but you have no part in what happens afterwards in their hearts – that is between God and the people who have heard the Word. But you wait impatiently to hear what God has done in the heart of a brother or sister, you wait for the shout of joy!

The exciting thing about preaching is that you can never forecast what it will do – you can never guess how God will use it. In Isaiah 55 God Himself makes a promise about the preaching of His Word. In verses 10 and 11, Isaiah says: *'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.'*

What is Preaching?

Throughout the centuries many answers have been given to the question 'what is preaching?' Some say that preaching is explaining God's Word. Others add that preaching is both explaining and applying God's Word. Yet others say that preaching is simply telling people about God. Many experts on preaching talk a lot about the connection between God's Word and those who are listening to it.

Among the many definitions of preaching, we choose: *'Preaching is persuading the hearer of the relevance of the Biblical message'*.

Persuading

Persuading the hearer means that you deliver the Biblical message in such a way, that it really touches those who hear it, who then believe it, and act upon it.

If you want to persuade those who listen to your sermon, you must make sure that first of all they clearly understand what you mean and what the Biblical text means. So, it starts with their head, with understanding. It's your job to prepare and deliver the biblical message in such a way that they can grasp the meaning of it.

But this is only one part of being persuasive. The other part is that not only their head, but also their heart should be moved and touched. They only will apply the message to their daily life's if they feel that this is about them, about their daily life with God and with the people and the world around them.

That is what we mean with relevance: it's about me! If people understand that the Word of God is not just a very old book with stories from people ages ago, but that the message through these stories will change their life today, then they will listen to your sermon and apply the Word of God in their life and that they need to respond and obey. So, the aim of the sermon is to both give a clear explanation of the biblical message as well as motivate the hearers to do what it says.

Stories

One of the ways people can truly relate to the biblical message is by telling stories. Good stories always touch people's heart. Luckily the Bible is essentially a storybook, it's theology in stories.

Just think about the great stories of God dealing with his wayward people, of the conflict between sinful men and a righteous God. Think about the tension, the heartache, the longing in God's amazing plan of salvation, and the drama and intrigue of lives changed by His Holy Spirit. It's all there.

These are the elements which, if you incorporate them into your preaching, will grip your listeners and make the Bible, and God come alive to them. He will no longer be a remote figure in a big book, but a living, powerful, and loving Being who touches people's lives. And that is what people today are hungry for – the experience of God, and not just the facts about Him.

Every text a message

One of the most important things in preaching the Word of God is to realise that the whole Word of God is also written as a sort of sermon. The various literary forms such as the historical books, poetry, songs, gospels, letters, all carry in their own way a message they want to proclaim. So, every part of Scripture has a message that is applicable to the life's of those who read or listen to it in every time and in every place.

This is what Paul writes to Timothy in 2Timothy 3:16 *“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”*. So the challenge for every preacher is, knowing that there is a divine message in every part of the Bible, to discover this message and apply it to their own time and culture.

This is particularly challenging if we consider the fact that when Paul talks to Timothy about the Scriptures, he is referring to the only Scripture available at his time, the Books of Moses and some other parts of the Old Testament. How can we make the stories of the Old Testament relevant for our own times and how can we relate the

people of the Old Testament to ourselves?

The answer is given to us by the apostle James. In James 5:17 he writes these important words: *“Elijah was a human being, even as we are”*. He means that despite the centuries of time difference and cultural difference between Elijah and us, there is one thing that connects us into a close bond: he is as human as we are. He has the same longings, the same fears, the same love and the same hate. So, even though there are many differences in time and culture, what unites us with all these ancient people in the Bible is that being human and the way God deals with humans and humans respond to God and each other, is no different at all.

This is what theologians call 'relational hermeneutics': there is a relation between human beings that goes beyond borders of time and place and that is why we can relate to the stories in the Bible and understand and apply their message today.

Preparing takes time

It might be clear that discovering the message of a part of Scripture and show the relevance of that message for today is not an easy task. It takes time to first of all carefully read and study the Word of God for next Sunday. Then it takes time to grasp the message and see what it means for your people today. This only comes with a great deal of studying and serious considerations and prayerful meditation. That is why I urge preachers to take time to prepare a sermon.

You can of course prepare a sermon in a few hours and experienced preachers can cope with less time. But it will not be as good as it should be. It's a bit like the difference between a snack prepared in a few minutes in a microwave oven, and a gourmet meal which has taken hours to prepare. Which would you rather have? God's Word requires thorough 'cooking' if it is to satisfy the needs of the congregation. And it will not only benefit them, but you too.

The Preaching Process

The preparation of a sermon is called the preaching process and it is this process that preachers go through every time they have the privilege to preach. It is important to go through this process step by step and not to rush to the final step immediately. If you want to take the Word of God serious, step 1 is your starting point. But a preacher also takes his people serious, therefore step 2 is not to be left out. All through the process we realise that we depend fully on the anointing of the Holy Spirit, that is why we immerse ourselves into the message in order to let the Spirit guide us in our hearts. Finally, after serious preparation and meditation, we are ready to deliver the message and preach with passion!

These are the four steps of the preaching process and we will go through every step in depth in the next chapters:

Step 1 - Discovering the message by keeping faithful to the text

Step 2 - Structuring the sermon in order to get through to the listener

Step 3 - Immersing yourself in the message and stay close to your heart

Step 4 - Delivering the message. Preach it with passion

Discovering the message by keeping faithful to the text

We already saw that there is a unity in how people from the biblical times experienced God and each other and life with all its up's and downs. They were human beings like us. On the other hand we need to realise that when we read the Bible, we read books and letters that were written by people who lived over a period of 1500 years and who lived mostly in the Middle-East. The times and cultures that the Bible was written in, influenced the way the Word of God is written down in every way.

The church has always confessed that the Bible is the Word of God given to us in human words in history. This means on the one hand that the Bible has eternal relevance because it speaks Gods truth that is truth in every time and every place. At the same time God spoke through people in a specific historical and cultural context and used their words, images and historical events. So, the Bible speaks Gods eternal truths in the particular circumstances and events of history. The beauty of this is that Gods Words are not like philosophical thoughts, way above our daily life, but that they enter into everyday life, then and there. That gives them meaning for our ever day life here and now as well.

At the same time we need to consider that Gods speaking in history to people living then and there, means that we cannot simply read the Bible and apply it directly to our situation. It was written first of all to these people in that time. In order to find the real meaning of the Word of God, we first need to know what the original meaning for the original readers or listeners was. Only then can we begin to understand and to interpret the text as it is written in our Bibles.

If we want to learn the true meaning of a text, we first need to discover what these words meant for the people who were originally addressed. In order to find out what it means, we need to take three steps of what is called exegesis, which means find out the original intent of this part of Scripture. If we know the original intent, we can

discover the message or the eternal truth that is hidden in the text and then we can apply this to our own life's and situations.

Since we do this exegesis in order to prepare a sermon, we will take 6 steps in total to discover the original intent, the message of the text and what it means for us today. This is not your sermon yet, this is the preparation for your sermon. This is collecting the building blocks that you will use to build your sermon.

Choosing the text

Before you start working on a part of Scripture, you first need to deliberately choose a text to preach on. Preachers choose their text in three different ways. The first is the 'lectio continua'; reading the entire Bible, with or without the help of a reading plan. The second is looking for Bible passages which will speak into a current situation or need in the congregation. The third is for the preacher to prayerfully select a passage which speaks to him directly – and the sermon then becomes an expression of the burden he has on his heart.

Five steps to discover the message

We said that preaching is persuading your people of the relevance of the biblical message for today. It's all about the biblical message. Therefore step one in the preaching process is discovering the message. This is the very first thing you do, when you sit down to prepare your sermon. You ask, what is the message? There are six steps we can take which will help us work out what that message is. These steps are a route towards the place where the text will speak to us as we analyse it thoroughly.

Step 1: What is the situation of the text?

It is crucial that you make it clear to your listeners what is actually going on in the text. You can only do that if you realise for what occasion this Bible book has been written and what was the purpose of this book or this chapter of the Bible? What happened in Israel that God needed to act in this way or what was going on in the church of Corinth that this letter needed to be written? The answer to these questions about the historical context are often found in

that Bible book itself.

So the first part of exegesis of the text is discovering what it is actually saying. This requires reading, reading and more reading. If you read it aloud you will hear and see what is written and how it is written. You need to make yourself read it with care and concentration. If you read the whole Bible book or letter as you would a paperback, you will gain an overview, which is essential to understand the context of the text. What you are aiming for is to come back to the text with fresh eyes, and see it hopefully in a new light.

Another way is to visualize the story – turn it into a movie in your imagination. Use all your senses: what do you hear? What do you see? What do you smell? What do you taste? Get a real feel for it. It helps if you put what it is saying into your own words. Yet another way is to ask questions of the text – the four 'w's' – who? what? where? when?

The answers are not always evident from the text alone. You need to study the context and get a full picture – an overview. Otherwise you may end up misunderstanding what the text is actually saying. If available, Bible commentaries are very helpful to find information about the context and the original intent of the writers. If you have access to the internet, there you can find lots of information as well.

For example, if you want to prepare a sermon on 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, how does this step look like? I chose this text because here Paul talks about the secret of his fruitful preaching. If you want to know about the situation he is writing about, you can find this in Acts 18 and in 1 Corinthians 1:10-25. We read that Paul came from the capitol of Greek world of knowledge and philosophy, the city of Athens. There he had argued and discussed with the great minds of these days on the Areopagus hill. If you look at his speech, he uses the poetic and philosophical language of the Greek, he talks about God and how God send a man who was raised from the dead. He does

not mention the name of Jesus or the cross. The result is that they laugh at him and only a couple of people gave there life to Jesus. Then Paul continues his travels from Athens to Corinth. He soon finds out that the Jews want to see miracles of the preachers that pass by the city and that the Greek wat to hear philosophical wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:22). But after Athens, Paul no longer wanted to adjust his message or language to what people want to hear. He says in 1 Corinthians 1:23 and in 1 Corinthians 2:2 that he had decided to only preach about Jesus Christ crucified. So that the situation he is in.

Step 2: What is the message?

This is a second crucial step in preparing the sermon - what is it about, what is its main message? Every text contains one key message. The author may break it down into a number of branches but there is always only one trunk. That one message, which should also be the central theme of the sermon, is what they aim to bring to the people. So, it is not a good idea to take an individual word, sentence or thought out of the text and preach on that. You will miss the message the author intended, and there is also the real danger that you will go your own way.

So the first question is: 'what is the main idea, the main message in this text?' Questions that will help you find this message or main idea are:

- a. What was the author's purpose in writing the text?
- b. What did it mean to the people he wrote it for?
- c. What situations or events prompted him to write it?

Looking for the message is looking for the reason why the writer wrote this text in the first place. What did he want his readers to know or to do. Why did he write this? The answer to this question is often that there is a principle or biblical lesson that the writer teaches in the midst of a specific situation. It's your task as preacher to find that lesson or biblical truth that is demonstrated in what is written in that situation. Ask yourself: what is he really want to say?

So this goes a level deeper into the text: it's not only that you understand the situation or context, but now you discover also the reason why he wrote this, the lesson or truth that he wants to communicate to his readers then and now.

If you want to make sure you really have a clear message, force yourself to write it down in one sentence, avoiding theological terminology. It must be a sentence that can be understood by the teenagers of your church as well!

In our example of 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 we are looking for the message by asking these questions above. His purpose of writing this letter is that he found out, after he had left Corinth to go to Ephesus, that people started to criticize him and his preaching. Was he a true apostle, a real preacher since he appeared so weak and his sermons were so simple? Wasn't Peter a much more powerful preacher and Apollos a much better speaker? (1 Corinthians 1:12). Then Paul writes in response the reason why he preached like he did. It is in 1 Corinthians 2:4 "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power". These are in my opinion the key words of this part of Scripture, the message he wants to proclaim. He wants to make clear the difference of believing the Word of God because of human wisdom or eloquence or, happened when Paul preached, because they are touched through the simple words about Jesus Christ crucified by the Holy Spirit. So the message of Paul in one sentence is: You can only believe in Jesus love for you on the cross by the power of the Holy Spirit!

Step 3: What is the biblical-theological truth that is presented here?

When it becomes clear what the text is about and what the message is, it is important that you put it into a broader context. Paul or Peter or Isaiah is not the only one in the Bible who has spoken about this important subject. You need to find out what is said about it in other parts of Scripture. This will add a depth and richness as these other texts, acting like lamps shining from different angles, reveal more

treasures in your text. It is a way of illustrating the truth of this part of Scripture with the help of other parts of Scripture. This will make the message even more convincing. It is really looking at the 'theology' of the message, by examining other passages on the same subject and seeing how they all interlink with the themes of the Bible.

Looking at 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, several other Bible texts come to mind. For example Zechariah 4:6 "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty". Or the words of Jesus in John 3:8 "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit".

Step 4: Dealing with objections

We have reached the stage where we have discovered what the text is saying. We have heard what God is saying. You sense the text is becoming more and more a part of you – and it is increasingly dominating your thoughts.

Now that the context and the message are clear, and we have plumbed its depths, we have to be absolutely honest about its affect upon us. That will give us some idea of the people's response when they hear it. They may have a few 'yes buts'. A clear message may come with a clear challenge and therefore provoke a clear objection: 'I don't like what I am hearing' and so on - 'yes buts'! Or it may raise questions like: 'Why does God say this?'. In fact it may well create the very same reactions as those who first heard or read these words thousands of years ago: astonishment and amazement or doubt and confusion – does God really mean . . . ? A clear Biblical message always calls for a response of some sort - especially if it clashes with our own experience or challenges the way we have been thinking about what the passage means.

At this point in your sermon preparation you are not only doing an exegesis of the text, but you also perform an exegesis of the people that will listen to your sermon. If you can imagine what their problem will be with this message, you can help them to deal with it

in your sermon, instead of ignoring this and let them go homewith lots of questions and yes ... but's. You have to acknowledge the 'yes but's' at this stage, and deal with them head on.

Talk about the objections in your sermon. Don't avoid the big questions which your message has raised. But make sure you answer them too. Help your listeners find a way of dealing with the difficulties they are having by pointing them in the right direction.

If you don't know how your listener will respond to the message, what their objections will be, there is simple trick to find out. Realise that you are just like them: a human being with the same feelings, longings and troubles as all of them. So, if you want to come close to their hearts and deal with their objections to this biblical message, just be very honest with yourself, search your own heart and mind and see what your objection is to this message. How do you deal with your objections and still live close to God despite your yes .. but's? This way you will be able to help your church with it as well.

The objections I feel by Paul's message are strong: Yes, the Spirit is at work, but is it not important too to prepare a good and persuasive sermon? Yes, it is not human wisdom or power that will convince others about Jesus, but shouldn't we use our gifts of eloquence? All these questions come to my mind, but I know what Paul would answer me: you can use your gifts, your preparation and all you to share the gospel, but changing someone's heart and life is done by the Holy Spirit alone. He will use you, but He does not depend on your wisdom or powerful preaching, He just uses your words to touch peoples hearts.

Step 5: What shall we do?

The sermon may have been an excellent discourse on a Biblical theme, and people may talk about it for a long time afterwards, but it still may not help them in their daily lives. The function of the preacher is not just to pass on the message, but help his listeners put it into practice. That is the ultimate goal.

So the big question here is: 'What do you want to happen in the hearts of your listeners? What changes in their lives do you want your message to produce? You long to hear the same question that people asked Peter after his Pentecost sermon: 'Brothers, what shall we do?'

Preaching is always aimed at getting a response – a response which will impact their everyday lives. God's Word does something in people, it changes them, it sets them on a new path. But the direction God wants them to go should be made clear to them. Make this application for their daily life as practical as possible. What should they do?

What do I want people to do with the message of Paul? I want them to believe and trust that they should not wait with proclaiming the gospel or witnessing about Jesus until they think they are wise or strong or convincing enough. Just speak from your heart and the Spirit will convince those who listen to you. Do not hesitate to speak of Jesus and the cross, though it sounds foolish, the Spirit will reach those He wants to reach with your words!

In these five steps we have made our way to the heart of this text and the core of the sermon. We have discovered the message. We have an objective to aim at. What matters now is to structure the sermon in such a way that the message and the relevance of it can be effectively communicated.

Structuring the Sermon in a way people are captured by the message

The funniest joke won't get a laugh if it's badly told. It is the same with preaching. You may have many great and amazing things to say, but you have to say them in a well-planned and structured way, otherwise no-one will listen.

Communications experts tell us that: 'It is 'structure' which makes the story convincing and gives it the power to persuade'. A message which is well thought out and structured properly is much more likely to be received and accepted by its listeners than one that isn't.

In our media dominated culture – both written and visual media – there's always something which grips or challenges the audience. The same goes in preaching. Your message needs to be 'going somewhere' – your listeners need to feel they are being taken on a journey which has a final destination. And the journey needs to be as interesting and attention-holding as possible. The last thing you want is to be 'boring' and send your listeners to sleep.

Working out the structure

In my decades of experience as preacher and communicator I found out that a good structure is one where the sermon 'takes off', climbs to its climax, and starts to descend and land without any delay. Whereas almost all earlier books on preaching teach the traditional structure of a beginning, middle and conclusion, I encourage preachers to structure the message so that it gradually builds towards its climax. I believe this is more appropriate to our media based culture. It makes the message relevant and applicable – and is much more meaningful, helping today's hearers face the issues and problems of daily living.

Preachers need to look for the drama that is already there in the text. It will vary from passage to passage. The Bible is full of exciting and gripping accounts of God's dealings with His people - and this dramatic element is what will draw your listeners in to your

message. If you get it right – your listeners will pay close attention.

Head and heart

In practice, finding a good structure can be quite difficult for many preachers. How do you take the results of your reading, studying and meditation and form them into a well-structured sermon? And perhaps a bigger question is – how do you get that message into the heart of the hearers? As we noticed at the beginning of this chapter, it is not enough to educate the mind alone. The heart also has to be touched otherwise there will be no real change in the life of the listener. So the challenge now is to convey the message in such a way that the listener is captivated and that it touches their heart.

Of course, you may be able to come up with several methods for structuring your message – which also depends on the kind of text you are preaching from, whether its poetry, history, letters and so on. The more familiar you are with one type of structure the easier it will be for you to adapt it as necessary.

Impact of the message

I like to preach to the heart rather than to the mind only. I don't focus solely on analysing the text – rather I concentrate on the impact of its message – 'what is this text actually saying to me?' By making it relevant, maybe by drawing out the similarities between the experiences of people in the Bible, and those of the listeners, I touch their hearts. It is preaching 'heart to heart': from the heart of God, via the heart of the preacher to the heart of the listener. Outlined below are 5 steps which will help you towards a good structure:

1. The beginning: raising expectations

The first part of the sermon should create a direct connection between the message and the listeners which reaches their hearts. The sermon should not be something they just listen to and sit through – but an 'experience' – something which engages their whole personality. A good beginning creates this expectation of an 'experience' – and so will hold their attention as they listen – and hopefully discover things that will bless them. If they are not

encouraged to 'expect' – you will soon lose their attention.

One way of losing the attention of your church very rapidly is by plunging into the text or explanation of the text immediately. People are not ready yet, they need to be taken by the hand and lead into the context of this part of Scripture. To say it in the terminology of a farmer: first you have to plow the ground before you sow the seed. The beginning of the sermon is helping people to relate with this part of Scripture. The best way to do that is not by giving them textual details, but by making the connection between the situation of your text and the situation of our daily life and emotions.

Remember there are so many different people in front of you, all with quite different levels of understanding. The manual laborer and the university graduate are sitting next to each other. How do you reach both of them at the same time? How do you hold their attention? The answer is not to approach them on a purely intellectual level, but start with something they can both identify with. Use the language of the heart and the emotions. Stories from everyday life work well – especially if it is something you have experienced yourself or have heard or read, maybe in the newspaper. The important point is that it is familiar and recognizable to everyone. You also need to make sure, that the story illustrates the central emotion of your sermon. By that I mean it touches them at the level of their deepest feelings.

Let us look, for example, to the story of Jesus, visiting Martha and her sister Mary in the village of Bethany, which is written in Luke 10:38-42. If you should start your sermon by going directly to the text, you would start like this: "Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem and pass the village of Bethany. There lived His friends Martha and Mary, who invited Him in their house". People will not be triggered to listen any further by these words. I once started a sermon on this part of Scripture with describing a scene in my own home: "In our family we have the rule that the children help clean the table after dinner and do the dishes. Now, almost always, one of the two have to visit the bathroom very urgently just after they

started to do the dishes, so the other one is left with the dishes and does the all the work by herself. This happened again last night, but now, the child doing all the work alone again became so angry that she came up to me, stamped her feet and shouted: Daddy, tell her to help me!. Well, brothers and sisters, exactly that was what Martha said to Jesus". After this, I tell about the situation of the text, but now people can relate to Martha, feel what she felt and recognize her anger. They 'are' Martha, because through the story of my children they feel the anger and by relating that with Marta they can feel Marta's anger as well. This draws them into the story of text with all their heart. They are now ready to hear more about the situation of the text and to hear the message.

So, the story of everyday life that you start with is meant to have the same emotion as the story of the Bible text you are preaching!

2. What is going on?

There is always the possibility that even after a good opening – the response will be 'so what?' The listener may feel the text you are speaking on has little relevance to his or her life. 'What does it have to do with me?' So you, as the preacher have to work at making the text or the passage connect with the lives of the hearers. How do you do that? You explain what is going on in the passage, emphasizing the 'human interest' elements which you discovered in your preparation. You demonstrate just how meaningful and applicable it is to those sitting in front of you.

Look at it like a movie – zoom in on the details that 'connect', without forgetting the main thrust of the story. Get inside the characters of the people the passage is talking about – what they felt when this or that happened. Make the characters come alive! You will find you are keeping your audience riveted – you are talking about emotions and experiences they know all about.

If we look again at the story of Marta and Mary, at this stage you can paint the situation in such a way that it is recognizable for your people: My daughter stood before me, angry and

asking in a loud voice: Daddy, tell my sister to help me! That how Marta stood before Jesus, angry and upset and she said: "Lord don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!". Marta was frustrated, because when visitors arrived in a Middle-East house, you do not just pour them some coffee or tea, you prepare a meal for them. Hospitality is the most important virtue for a Middle-East woman, that's how you show your respect for your guests. So Marta needs to prepare 13 meals at once. And I think that she would love to sit at the feet of Jesus as well, why not? But somebody has to do the work for the Lord, somebody has to open up the church, somebody has to teach the youngsters, somebody has to organize the congregation, somebody has to go and evangelize and so on. That why Marta is angry: she is so busy serving the Lord and Mary just sits down to listen.

3. The message

The next step focuses on the main theme of your sermon. This is the central message - what it is all about. Now you can expand on it and speak at length and in detail. It's essential to remember though: keep it clear and understandable so that everyone will grasp the main point which should be the core, or the 'heart' of your sermon. It may also help to clarify or reinforce your message by using other appropriate texts as you discovered in your preparation – but not too many. They can often add extra insight and understanding of your main text – like a light coming from a different angle.

Jesus responds to Marta's complaint. He doesn't say that she is doing a wonderful job, he doesn't applaud her for taking care of Him, all He says is: you are so busy with many things that seems very important, but few things are needed, indeed only one: what Mary chose to do, sit and receive from Me, that is all that is really necessary. In fact, Jesus says the same here as He said before in Marc 10:45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served and to give his life as a ransom for many". Jesus message is very clear: it is not about what you

can do for Me, but what you allow Me to do for you. Most important in life is that you sit down and listen to Me, hear My words, read the Word, receive what I want to share with you.

4. The objection: yes, but....

By now, it is important to express the doubts and objections which may arise in response to your message. 'I agree with what you are saying but . . .' You could call them the 'yes buts'. You need to be honest about them – acknowledge that this is how some people will react. You need first to listen honestly to your own 'yes buts'. Many preachers are so concerned with how their message will go down with their listeners that they forget to stop and ask themselves what their own response to it is. If you openly share what your own reactions are to your message, your honesty will win over your listeners. They will realize you are on their side.

The more you talk to people, and understand the issues and problems they may have about certain Bible themes, the more you will be able to help them. They will see you are the same, that you have had the same questions, the same difficulties.

But you have taken the time to find the answers to these questions. Then when they see how seriously you take them, they will listen to you, and take in what you have to say. This makes preaching very exciting, as you realize you are speaking effectively and powerfully into their situation and making God's word real to them.

Yes, what Jesus said is true, but somebody has to do the job. Somebody has to organize church, prepare a sermon, make music, watch over the little children and so on?! We cannot just sit down all day with our Bible, can't we? Indeed we cannot. But what we can do is start our day with sitting at the feet of Jesus. If we start with reading the Word and meditating it and pray over it, we start with Jesus and that will bless everything we do during the rest of the day. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all else will be given to you".

5. What shall they do?

The fifth element in the sermon is its closing. You have preached a message from a text or passage of Scripture, now you challenge the people with how they are going to respond to it. What am I going to do with it? Where do I go from here? What changes is it calling me to make? In many ways the conclusion is like a signpost, pointing people in the right direction. It can also be a new beginning. There is now work to be done, and now I know how to do it. It can also be a door, opening out into a new life – with new vision, new hope, new dreams. Make this point as clear and practical as possible, so people really know what to do to apply this message into their daily life!

So, my advice to you, church, is that you plan a moment every day to sit at the feet of Jesus. For some it might be early in the morning, for others it might be in the evening or night. It doesn't matter when you do it or how long you do it, as long as you set time apart every day to sit at Jesus feet, because only then you'll find out what it means that Jesus says to you: I want to serve you! Amen.

In these five steps we have structured the sermon in a way that captures the listener's attention and brings the message home to their hearts.

How to write down your sermon

The next question is how we are going to write our sermon down? Do we write it out in full? Or do we use a few key words?

Preachers have different ideas on whether you should or should not write out the sermon in full. In my own country, the Netherlands, most preachers have been trained to write out the sermon in full because – so they were told – it will stop you 'waffling' or getting on to your 'hobby horse'. The reason, they say, is that preaching is a responsible task and therefore you should choose each word carefully. Unfortunately, this way of thinking has prevailed in our theological seminaries for many decades. The result is that many

preachers write down carefully composed sentences and then deliver that same written language from the pulpit. Preaching the sermon then becomes more like an exercise in reading instead of speaking. It's an unnatural way of speaking. The preacher has become more like a newsreader, than a proclaimer, delivering God's message with heartfelt feeling and passion.

Key words

The notion that not writing out the sermon in full encourages a casual irreverent attitude in the pulpit is usually based on a few bad examples. Of course, there are people who preach with either no notes or just a few – and do indeed waffle. But that is more likely caused by inadequate preparation. The crucial thing is that you 'connect' with your listeners – that they really sense you are talking to them and not the wall behind. Communication experts tell us that eye contact is a key factor in connecting with people. You won't have that if you are forever looking down at your full notes! The best method is to limit them to key words. They will keep you on track, as you have a quick glance down to remind yourself what your next point is. You will have much more time to have eye contact with the congregation.

Mind mapping

The best system I know to write down your sermon is a system called 'Mind Mapping'. It works by creating an image of your notes, in the form of a map, which is then easy to visualize and remember. You can see at a glance where you are in your message, and what you should say next.

A Mind map is an image of someone's thoughts (mind) and is presented on a sheet of paper as a network of colourful key words and symbols that summarize a lot of information. Every key word has been chosen in such a way that it is like a stock cube – containing concentrated information with all the key words interconnected.

A mind map is always presented in 'landscape format' as people naturally look more from side to side than up and down. Because

you compress your thoughts into key words and write down only the barest essentials you need to remember, one sheet of paper can keep you going for quite a long time. The result is a gradually expanding network that starts to look like a spider's web. Many people who first look at a Mind map may find it confusing. For those who use it though, it enables them to quickly access the information which is in their mind. You make the mind map as carefully as you can. You can always alter it later.

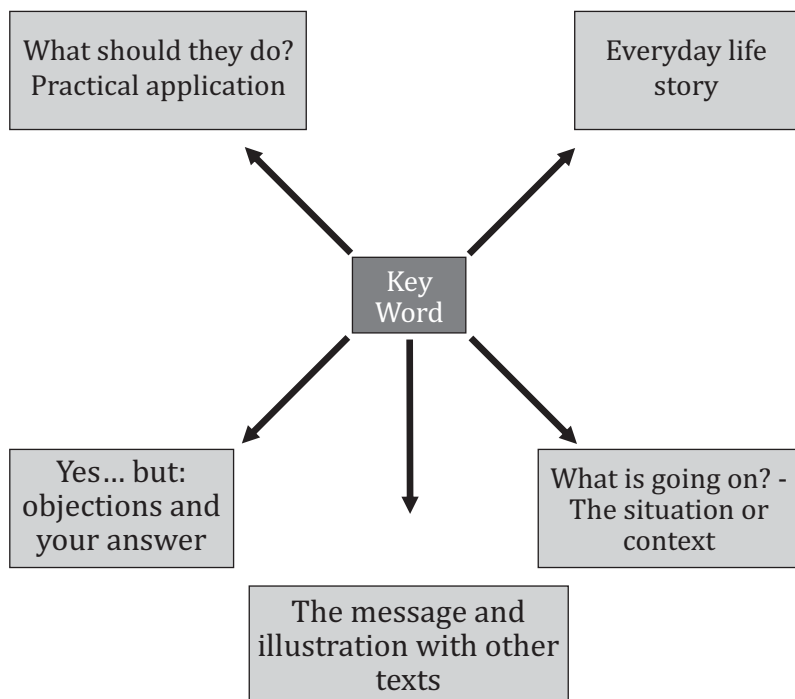
Basic principles

Mind mapping can quickly be learnt based on a number of simple principles. These principles have not only been based on recent insights into the functioning of the brain, but actually result from years of experience of people around the world who started to work with Mind maps in all sorts of situations.

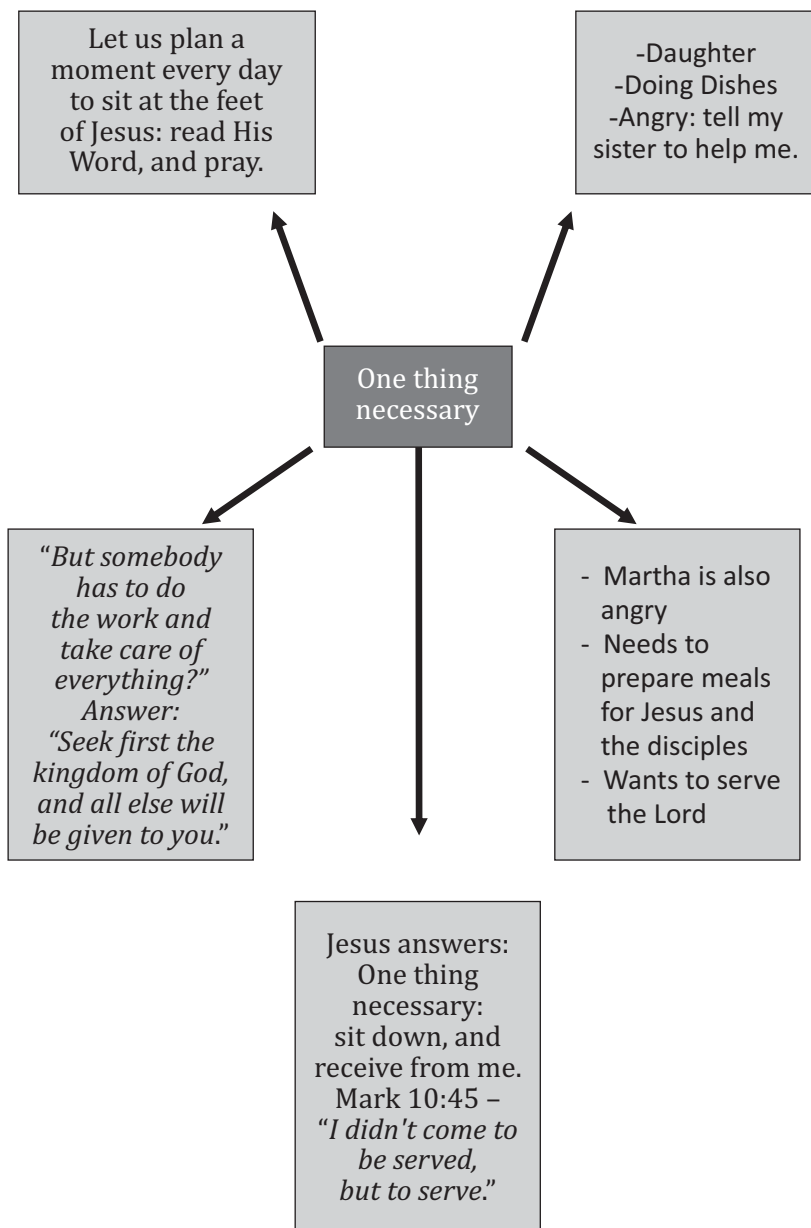
1. A key word or title is written down in the middle of a horizontally placed empty sheet of paper (or computer spread sheet) which describes the subject. Mind mapping is mostly a visual activity. The sheet should be used in 'landscape' format to give a much better panoramic view. It is easier to make notes in all directions on unlined paper. Different colours and a clear central title grab your attention and help you focus on the subject.
2. Choose appropriate key words, pictures, symbols or codes and use different fonts for the whole of your mind map. Don't make too many wordy notes. You don't need to write down what you already know. Each key word acts to 'unlock' the information it is associated with in your mind. Just a few key words, can unlock a lot of information.
3. Write down your main ideas clearly – preferably in block letters. You can add in any thoughts or ideas that come to mind later, but in smaller letters. The fewer the words, the quicker you can take in what is on the map. A good key word creates a strong association with the idea or thought it represents. It will trigger your memory, even after a few weeks!

4. All these key words are connected like the branches of a tree, radiating out from the first, central key word you wrote down when you started. The Mind map is drawn so that everything can be read at a glance and without having to turn your head during the presentation.
5. It is important to use a few clearly recognisable colours to give each main branch and its sub branches their specific colour.

This is an example of a mindmap:



**If we apply the mindmap to our sermon example,
this is what that mindmap looks like:**



Meditate your sermon: immersing yourself in the message

A well-known preacher once said: 'In preparing a sermon, half the time is spent working on the actual sermon. The other half is spent working on the preacher'. God has decreed that His divine Word is conveyed to the world through human words. The preacher is first a listener – who needs to listen well, before he then passes on to others what he has heard. He is a witness who tells what he has seen and experienced when he was listening to God's Word. Your preparation of your sermon is not over once you have worked out your message and structured it. You are only half way there! One more stage to go before you deliver it – and that is your own personal preparation. The message has to become part of you – something you are living and breathing yourself. Before you take it to the people next Sunday – you need to examine your own reaction to it. Where does it challenge me? Encourage me? Change me?

Absorbing the message

The first step in preparing our sermon is to discover what our message is to be – based on a particular Bible text or passage. The second step is to work out the structure of your message – how you are going to present it in a way that holds the congregation's interest and speaks directly to them. Now this third step is to absorb the message. Let it sink in – take time to meditate on it. Don't rush from your study to the pulpit. Make time in your preparation to allow it to touch your heart, because if it touches your own heart – then it will touch the hearts of your hearers.

You have reached the stage where your reference books are shut, you put down your pen and you try to become still before God. You now give time to listening to your own message – and with the help of the Spirit of God, discover what it is saying to you. Although you have already been doing this, almost unconsciously to some extent, as you have been preparing your message, you are now doing this as a definite conscious action. It is doing what Jesus said in Matthew 6:6 about going into your room and locking the door to pray to your

Father in secret. You have to create a time and place for God's Spirit to apply the message of your sermon to your heart. For some this place may be a room in their house. For others, it's a walk in a wood, a field or a garden. In such places, you can sometimes sense God speaking to you through both His creation and His Word.

By making personal prayer and meditation part of your sermon preparation, you will allow God's Spirit to breathe life into it. From being a dry skeleton, it will come alive. You go through the sermon guided by God's Spirit. I would encourage you to actually speak out the sermon with God as your first listener. You pray through every step of the sermon, and get a burden for the message God wants you to deliver. Then you are silent because you know that God will speak to you in this silence. Silence is the secret of meditation. Jesus says in Matthew 10:27: 'What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the rooftops.' Meditating on your sermon is listening to God's whispers and feel how the Spirit sets your soul on fire with the message of your sermon.

How to meditate

Meditation is most effective when you follow a few simple guidelines.

Come to rest. Be still and concentrate. Become aware of the presence of God: 'He is here, He is here with me, He lives in me.' Make room for listening to God's Word in this way.

- A) Ask the Holy Spirit for open ears, open eyes and an open heart.
- B) Read your entire sermon slowly. Be conscious of each step. Familiarize yourself with the points of the sermon as well as with what you want to say by speaking your sermon out loud to yourself. Familiarize yourself with the words of the sermon and let them resound in your heart. Do this prayerfully, as if God is looking at sermon over your shoulders. Ask at every of the five steps: Lord, is this

pleasing to You? Is this what You want me to share?

- C) Familiarize yourself with the images of the sermon. How do they affect you? Where are they taking you? Put yourself into the story. Hear, look, taste, feel, smell...
- D) Ask yourself questions. How does this sermon move me? Do I feel a resistance, anger, sadness, powerlessness, opposition? Is there something that strikes me that I find beautiful, which makes me glad? Does the message call for a change in my own life?
- E) Pray to the Spirit of the Word for renewal of your own life. Does this connect with the Word you have listened to? Surrender yourself to Christ, Who meets you in His Word. Rest in His presence. Bring glory to God.

From heart to heart

While meditating on your sermon you will receive what really matters, the anointing of God's Spirit. He places your sermon in God's light and gives you, as the first listener, the first blessing from it. The sermon is now really your sermon; it lives in your heart. Only those who let the sermon really speak to their own hearts by praying and receiving can speak to the hearts of others.

We have now reached the stage where the sermon has to be preached. And there is only one way: with passion! That is what our next chapter is about.

Preach with passion

The sermon and the preacher are well prepared. The time to deliver it has come. Every Sunday thousands of preachers step onto the podium or enter the pulpit to proclaim what they have heard and discovered during the preceding week. Every one of them will have his own style, his own method, depending on their character, temperament, education and talents.

Filled with Compassion

I see the preacher as a witness. Matthew 28 describes the time when Jesus sent out his disciples with the words: *'You will be my witnesses ...'* When the coming of the Holy Spirit was promised to the apostles, it was for the purpose of empowering them to testify (Acts 1:8). A witness is someone who is called to tell others what he has heard or discovered. A witness is a compassionate person. He is moved by what he has to say and you notice it. There is passion and fire in him. This is very important for the preacher. Some preachers tend to hide their personal feelings behind impressive words and beautifully constructed sentences. But in preaching the primary objective is not to impress with style, but to touch, persuade and convince. The compassion of the preacher plays a major role in this.

Paul expresses this perfectly in 1 Corinthians 2:4: *'My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but in demonstration of the Spirit's power.'* In preaching, words are one of our tools. But these words need something else to be really effective. They need to be 'anointed with the power of the Spirit' as they are spoken. We should not be so concerned about speaking beautiful words, but inspired words, life giving words that are delivered in a life giving way. That doesn't mean you should jump around or use wild gestures as you preach. Not only are you 'full of the word' – you are full of the Holy Spirit. Being 'full of the Spirit' comes from the Greek 'theos', which is where we get the word 'enthusiastic'. If you are really enthusiastic about the message, people will definitely notice it. This enthusiasm is far more

important than how clever you are, or how refined and genteel you are. You should be real, be yourself, be filled.

This enthusiasm, this passion is really a passion for Jesus. Don't be fooled. Passion is not necessarily about raising the voice, making extravagant gestures, or strutting to and fro on the platform. Its presence is revealed in the eyes. They are the mirror of the soul. That's why having eye contact with the congregation is so important. People see in your eyes and hear in your voice what lives in you, and they can detect whether you have that passion or not. When it is there – and pray God it is, then the message comes across much more powerfully.

Principles of Presentation

Our ambition should be that we do not 'get in the way' of our message. By that I mean we should not hinder the effective communication of our sermon. We really need to 'be ourselves'. So below are some of the basic principles of effective presentation.

When preaching it is important to make contact with your listeners and develop a 'dialogue' with them. There has to be two way communication. Encourage them to make some sort of response, rather than just sit there passively. Ask them a question. 'Do you understand that?' 'Is that your experience?' When they answer back, or nod or shake their heads – you know you have made contact with them and are having 'dialogue'. A sermon is really a monologue within a dialogue.

In choosing the place where you speak, make sure that there are as few barriers as possible between you and the congregation. Speaking to people from behind a table or enclosed in a pulpit creates an atmosphere that is entirely different from that created by speaking from an open space. Many people like to have a table in front of them as it provides support and gives them somewhere to place their notes or, if they are nervous, something to hold on to. Speaking from an open space says 'this preacher is honest – he has nothing to hide'. Furthermore, it allows greater freedom to express

yourself, and adjust your position (but do avoid pacing backwards and forwards). This all helps make the presentation much more engaging and interesting. Try to avoid high, closed pulpits or rostrums as much as possible – you really cut yourself off from the people.

Eye contact

When having a conversation with someone, the amount of eye contact you have plays a crucial part in how the conversation goes. It's really no different when speaking in public, even though you are addressing a larger group of people. By making eye contact with your audience you will get a clear indication of how you are coming across. Having eye contact with someone who is listening attentively (and their body language shows it too as they lean forward and smile or nod in agreement) can really encourage you.

At ease

When you are preaching in front of a group, try and be conscious of the overall space you are in, and of the people in it. Make sure you look all around you as you speak – not leaving any part left out. Look up and out. Your audience needs to know you are looking at them so that they will feel involved and take in what you are saying.

Take time when you speak – don't rush. If you are tense, your sense of time will become distorted. It will feel as though time is passing more slowly – so you will end up rushing. Being at ease is really important in preaching. If you are not, you will make the audience feel uncomfortable and tense. They will sense your nervousness, and become nervous for you. So here are a few tips to help you be at ease:

1. If you are breathing too much in and out because you are nervous, there is this little trick that will help you regain control over your breathing: just move your toes in your shoes up and down. This will lower your attention and by that will lower your breathing from your chest to your belly and by that will bring rest again.

2. Stand with your feet slightly apart and firmly on the ground. Some people when they are nervous hop from one leg to another.
3. Most important advice for preachers and public speakers: know what you want to say, believe with all your heart what you are going to say and long to tell it to the people in front you. If your motivation is right, everything will be all right. Trust God, He is the One who called you, has sent you and will guide you!

Part 3 :

Teach me your way

Part 3 : Teach me your way

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Introduction to part 3:

Teach me your way

This part is about the third word of advice Jethro offers Moses, in which he says: 'show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave' (Exodus 18:20). Here, Jethro is talking about the task of teaching the people of God. Teaching focuses on the practical application in daily life of that which has been preached. In the Bible, teaching always centres on practising what we preach.

In the worldwide church, this teaching is known as *discipleship*. How can we live our lives as disciples of Jesus? How can we grow in following Christ? What does it mean to be a child of the Father? These things require knowledge of what the faith is really all about, and instruction as to how to put this knowledge into practice day by day. Discipleship combines our creed with our conduct; it deals with what we believe and what we do. That is what this part of the Pastors' Manual is all about: what do you teach your people in order to help them grow as disciples of Jesus. You can present the many questions in this section to your congregation when you teach them these lessons and you can also use them to go deeper into these lessons yourself.

Chapter 1

The teaching of the Christian Church

If we want to catch a glimpse of what God meant his church to be like, the best place to look is the early Christian church. Right after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, a large group of about 3,000 people came to faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41). They were baptised and began to come together in a large number of home churches. Led by the Spirit, they practised discipleship together. They functioned the way Jesus wants his church to function.

Acts 2:42-47 tells us what they did after they had come to faith and had started serving Jesus together. The first thing we read about them is that they *'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching'* (Acts 2:42). The first thing the Spirit led them to do was to learn. You might say that on that day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem with 3,000 students, and the twelve apostles as their teachers.

The Bible often calls the Holy Spirit the 'Spirit of truth'. Where the Spirit of truth is at work, there is a focus on discovering the truth. And it turns out the Spirit used apostles for this purpose. They had sat at the feet of Jesus, and now the believers were to sit at the feet of the apostles, to learn from them. The apostles' teachings were handed down to us in the New Testament. This means we, too, can discover God's truth. What a privilege it is to be enrolled in the school of the Holy Spirit. Teaching is very important for the church. Acts 2:42 shows us that a living church, first of all, is a learning church!

The apostolic teachings have been preserved and passed on since the days of the apostles. Throughout the entire history of the church, certain central themes that sum up the teachings of the Bible keep recurring. You could say that the teachings of the church of Christ centre on three major themes. Those who came to faith in the early church were instructed in these themes before being

baptised and accepted as members of the congregation. The themes form a triad: faith-obedience-prayer. In the great revival of the church in the West following the Middle Ages, also known as the Reformation, these themes were restored to their central position. They point believers to the heart of the Christian faith and of living with Jesus.

Faith

The first theme is 'faith'. Every believer should have a clear understanding of what faith really involves and what it is, precisely, that we believe. It is important for your own life with God, but it is also important as you face a world that does not believe. You cannot give account of your faith (1 Peter 3:15) if you don't have the words, if you lack a clear understanding of what you believe about God and why. This is why the first theme in Christian teaching centres on the faith we adhere to as Christians. This teaching is based on the oldest and most well-known summary of the Christian faith: the Apostles' Creed.

Obedience

Christian teaching does not merely focus on knowledge, but also on learning to walk with God, to actually follow Jesus obediently. The best way to stay close to him and to remain in his love is to keep his commands. Jesus says this himself in John 15:9-10. The Ten Commandments, in particular, were given to show the people of Israel and the church of Christ how to stay close to God's heart and within his will. Jesus says he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17). These are the laws given to teach God's people and the church of Jesus how to live in a loving relationship with God and our neighbour. So if you wish to put the Apostles' Creed into practice, you will need the Ten Commandments. For this reason, we will look more closely at the Ten Commandments in the second section of this book on Christian teaching. The Bible offers a wonderful promise to those who instruct others in the Ten Commandments: *'but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven'* (Matthew 5:19b).

Prayer

The third central theme in Christian teaching is 'prayer'. A Christian has his daily life with God, in which he makes choices that are different from those made by non-believers. But on top of that, he also enjoys spiritual communion with God. Every believer who desires to stay close to Jesus must have this personal fellowship with God in order to keep the faith and to grow in it. It is the same in marriage: on top of the daily routine of living together, you need to have regular moments in your relationship when you look into one another's eyes and share what is on your heart. Jesus talks about going into your room to spend time in personal prayer with the heavenly Father (Matthew 6:6). Prayer is the key element in your spiritual life. It is vital for every believer to learn to lead a life of prayer. When the disciples asked Jesus: '*Lord, teach us to pray*', Jesus answered by teaching them the Lord's Prayer. This is why in this book we will be looking at our spiritual walk through the lens of the Lord's Prayer.

This triad of themes – faith, obedience, prayer – offers us a biblical foundation for expounding the basic tenets of the Christian faith, the daily following of Christ, and spiritual communion with God in the church of Christ.

Chapter 2

I believe...

Apostles' Creed

*I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy, apostolic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.*

What is believing?

Before looking at what we believe as Christians with the Apostolic Creed, we must ask ourselves what it actually means to believe. The Apostles' Creed begins with the words '*I believe...*' An old book on reformed doctrine, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, puts it this way (in my own words):

To believe is not only to know for certain that what the Bible says is true, but also to trust that through the suffering and death of Jesus my sins are forgiven and I am a child of God for ever. The Holy Spirit places this trust in my heart.

Assignment: Memorise those two sentences!

To believe, then, is a matter of the mind, of our thinking. To believe is to *know* for certain. It is a deep assurance that when you are reading the Bible you are not reading some random book written by humans, but that straight through the words, cultures and history it reflects, God is speaking to you. You read the Bible and you know God is speaking to you directly.

But unlike Islam, the Christian faith is not a book religion. At the centre of our faith we do not find a book, but we find the One to whom our Holy Scriptures testify. Luther said, '*Holy Scripture is the crib in which Jesus lies.*' Jesus Himself put it this way: '*You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life*' (John 5:39). The Bible is the most common route by which God comes to us. God makes himself known to us through his Word. His purpose is not for us to worship the Bible, but to follow Jesus, who speaks to us in the Bible, offering us His love.

But faith is more than having certainty about God and the Bible. It also means trusting firmly that God loves not only other people, but you, too. To believe is to be touched by the love of Jesus, to receive the invitation He holds out to you in the Bible and to say 'yes' to it. Believing is daring to take the leap: it means jumping into the outstretched arms of God, the way a child jumps into his father's arms. To believe is to entrust yourself, heart and soul, to God. It means giving your life to Him, so that He can save you, change you and lead you. So faith is not just a deep conviction about the Bible being the Word of God, it also means responding to God's love with your whole heart and soul.

I believe in God the Father

In the Bible, God has made Himself known to us. To find out who God is, we can look at the names He uses to introduce himself. The first name we come across is *Yahweh*. God uses this name to present himself to Moses in Exodus 3. It means 'I am who I am', or 'I will always be.' The name tells us that God is faithful and will always be with us, no matter what. Another name is *Adonai*, which suggests God is our Lord, our Master. He is the Creator, we belong to him. In Psalm 100:3, the psalmist sings about this: *'It is he who made us, and we are his.'* Another name for God in the Bible is *El Shaddai*, the Almighty. This name tells us that God knows no boundaries, no limitations, all is subject to his power: the angels, creation, mankind, and also Satan and his demons. God will always have the final say. The Lord reigns!

Father

The name most commonly used for God is *Father*. It begins back in the Old Testament, for instance in Isaiah 63:16: *'But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name.'* In this text, the fatherhood of God is linked to His role as protector. A father represents safety and protection. With God we are secure, He will not lose control.

But it is the New Testament, especially, that reveals God the Father to us – through Jesus. Jesus calls God his Father, He is God's Son. The wonderful gospel message is that through Jesus whoever believes in God will be adopted as His child. Paul exclaims this in Romans 8:15 and 16: *'...the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by Him we cry, "Abba, Father". The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.'* God is Father, and this name reflects His love, protection, care and guidance throughout our lives. A father stands for authority and love. God is placed above us, but is also with us in everything. A father will do anything for his child. This is why God says: *'Call me Father'*

(Jeremiah 3:19). It is important to remember that God is not like an earthly father, but that earthly fathers must seek to be like God the Father!

The Father of Jesus Christ longs to be my Father also. By his grace I may become His precious son or daughter, just as Jesus is. Jesus loves me as much as God loves his Son Jesus (John 15:9).

Trinity

The fact that God calls himself Father and Jesus introduces himself as God's Son leads us to another important fact we must know about God. In the church we call it the Trinity. God has revealed Himself as the only and unique God. There is no other god beside him. In Deuteronomy 6:4, Moses, speaking on behalf of God, puts it as follows: *'Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.'* So there is only one God. Yet the Bible speaks of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. All three are God. They are inseparable, a unity, and yet they are three 'persons'. From the very start, the church has struggled to find words for this mystery. It is a beautiful revelation given to us by God. The Father, the Son and the Spirit all have our salvation and renewal in mind – each in his own way. We will never be able to capture God in a system, but the Bible does reveal something of this mystery to us. Perhaps the most beautiful glimpse we are given of the Holy Trinity is at the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan (Matthew 3:16-17): *'As soon as Jesus was baptised, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased."*' These three persons are so united that wherever the Father is, the Son and the Spirit are also.

Perhaps you could compare the Trinity to the fingers on your hand: they are all different and can do different things, yet together they make up a single hand, they are inseparable. In the same manner, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are one. So they are not three different gods, but one God who has manifested himself to us in three 'persons': God the Father above us, God the Son beside us, and

God the Spirit within us. The more we get to know God and see His greatness and glory as Father, Son and Spirit, the more we realize we will never in our earthly lives grasp this, that all we can do is sing His praises, as Paul does: '*to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen*' (Romans 16:27).

The omnipotent Creator of heaven and earth

Omnipotence

The confession of the church regarding God the Father is that He is omnipotent. No one stands above Him and all things are subject to His sovereignty. Nothing is impossible with God. This is demonstrated in two main ways: we see God's power in the creation of heaven and earth, and we see God's power in his unending care for us.

In Genesis 1, we read about how God created the heavens and the earth. To create, literally, means to make something from nothing. In Genesis 1, we see God's creation gradually unfold. He begins with separating the heavens from the earth. The earth, at first, was a kind of formless substance. In the next phase, God began to give form and content to the earth. In a period of six days God then created our entire reality. God created a universe so great and so beautiful that we now know that even with all the knowledge we have amassed, we have only discovered a tiny fraction of the whole. Also, His creation is so complex and ingenious that every new discovery arouses a new sense of amazement in us.

Because of our inability to grasp it all, people look for all kinds of rational explanations. However, Hebrews 11:3 clearly states that only *'by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command.'* God spoke and it came into being. The Bible does not offer a historical, physical or biological account. The creation story was never meant as a scientific report. It was written as a confession of faith, a song of praise to the Creator in which His creative acts are confessed. Genesis 1 and 2 show us the bigger picture, which is quite clear throughout Scripture: God created this reality, he created space and time with the purpose of dwelling with us, His people. And He allows us to share in His love. Earth was prepared for us, so that, like Adam and Eve, we might live on this earth and walk with God upon it. We are to *'work it and take care of it'* (Genesis 2:15) and to enjoy its beauty and its fruits.

The fall

The great drama of history is that this good creation was broken by the fall of man. Adam and Eve, being tempted by Satan, desired to become like God. From that moment on, there is a fissure running through all of reality, separating God and us and separating people from one another; it even runs through each person's individual life. What was once harmonious and full of love is now damaged and broken. But right after the fall God demonstrated that He is not only loving, but also remains faithful forever. He did not let go of His plan for mankind and creation. He continues, straight through the brokenness of sin and death, to move toward the fulfilment of His purposes with all creation. And His purpose is that one day we will be with Him in a perfect world, in His kingdom that will have no end. There, God will be '*all in all*' (1 Corinthians 15:28). Because God did not want to let go of sinful man and our broken world, but wanted to repair the damage, He sent his Son. Even to this day, God remains faithful to what He created. This is the second way in which we see His omnipotence: He cares for us and is leading His creation towards His eternal kingdom.

God and suffering

God's ongoing care for His people and His creation is wonderfully comforting. But it also often raises difficult questions. God's faithfulness means He will not let go of this world or of me, and that ultimately He holds everything in His hands. This comforts me at times when I feel evil rules this world, or that sickness and death have the final word, that persecution and violence and poverty have free rein. No, says Jesus in Matthew 10:29-31: '*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.*' This is deeply comforting when we are going through trials we do not understand, or times of pain and suffering. God is faithful, He is there. Yet at the same time, we want God to use his omnipotence to solve our problems for us, to spare us difficulties...

If God is all-powerful, why doesn't He end all the suffering and

brokenness we see? The Bible tells us two things about this. First, it shows us how God, all through history, carries out His own plan with the people of Israel. He keeps the bigger picture in view, and His involvement with His creation and His people continues, even when we cannot see it. When the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, and later when they were exiled and all seemed lost, they sorrowfully hung their harps on the willows. But again and again, God proves Himself faithful to His promises and carries on. We often do not know why we must go through the depths, but we do know that in these depths God is fulfilling His purposes. We see this throughout the whole Bible.

The clearest evidence we have of God's faithfulness to us is Jesus. Rather than leaving us to save ourselves, or each other, God sent his Son. If there is one place and time in history that reveals God's faithfulness and care for us more than any other, it is when Jesus was hanging on the cross. Jesus did not come merely to share in our brokenness and suffering, but also to give us a way out. He led the way through suffering and death to God's kingdom for all who believe in Him. Thanks to Jesus and together with Him, we can endure suffering on this earth. We know that with Him we can make it – and that one day there will be an end to sin, suffering and death. A new and glorious morning will dawn. A day of eternal joy in God's kingdom. All will be perfect. This earth will once again be perfect, our lives will be perfect, all will be well. God is faithful, He will care for us and guide us, even if we do not always see or understand what is going on. He will not abandon the works of His hands!

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are described in the four gospels. The first three - Matthew, Mark and Luke - form a unity, as each one offers a brief biography of Jesus. Each of these three writers does this in his own way and his own style, with distinctive emphases and with his own group of readers in mind. While these three focus primarily on the words and actions of Jesus and the events that marked His life, the gospel of John is more meditative, taking more time to reflect on Christ's words, actions and experiences.

Son of God

The first statement the church makes about Jesus in its Apostles' Creed is that He is the Son of God. Jesus is God. But the words 'only' emphasise the uniqueness of the relationship between God and Jesus: they are in and of each other, they belong to each other, and they are one with the Holy Spirit. There is a bond of love between Father and Son. We find this echoed in John 3:16: *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'* Nothing is more precious and glorious than the love between the Father and the Son. This makes it all the more incomprehensible that God let his beloved Son go in order to save us!

We also catch a glimpse of their relationship at Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan and at his transfiguration on the mountain. God speaks audibly from heaven, saying: *'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'* (Matthew 3:17). Jesus is God's Son, and throughout his earthly life he remained fully God. At times this fact was quite evident, for instance in the miracles he performed, in the authority with which he spoke, when he calmed the sea, in his knowledge of people's thoughts, and in his power over demons, who recognised him as God's Son. In John 14:30, Jesus himself says that *'the prince of this world'*, the devil, has no hold over him. He is stronger and mightier than Satan.

Fully human

The wonder of it all is that Jesus deliberately laid down His divine glory, which regularly shines through in His words and actions. God knew we could not save ourselves from the power of sin and death. Because of this, someone without sin was needed to free us from captivity, someone willing to join sides with us. What was needed was someone willing to descend to the depths to which we have sunk as human beings. You cannot normally save a drowning person without jumping into the water yourself. This is what Jesus did for us.

Paul rejoices in this in Philippians 2:6-8: *'Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!'* The Son of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, became a human being like us. But it did not make him any less the Son of God. A king who takes up his abode in a slum and begins to live, think and feel like a pauper is still a king, even if no one recognises him as such.

Conceived by the Spirit, born of the virgin Mary

Jesus remained God's Son throughout his earthly life, yet he also became truly human, sharing in our feelings, thoughts, sorrows and disappointments. We cannot go far enough in imagining Jesus' manhood. This is why the church, in the Apostles' Creed, confesses that Jesus was *'conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary.'* It was God's work, He is of divine descent, yet He was born in the flesh, just as every other human being is born in this world. As a man, He was as vulnerable as we are, He grew up like we do, played like our children do, went to the toilet, washed Himself, knew hunger and thirst, could laugh and have fun or cry, or get angry. And... until the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at His baptism in the Jordan, He was unable to perform miracles or other unusual acts. Jesus speaks about this in John 5:19: *'Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by Himself...'* As long as God's Spirit did not empower Him, Jesus remained powerless on earth – that's how human, how

dependent He was. All the signs and miracles attributed to Him were performed in the power of the Spirit God had given Him.

If there is one place and time in which we see just how human He was during his lifetime here on earth, it is in Gethsemane. There His soul was *'overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death'* (Matthew 26:38) and He begged his disciples to stay with Him, confessing to them that *'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak'* (Matthew 26:41). At this time He also begged his Father: *'if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me'* (Matthew 26:39). Jesus was so afraid that at that moment He wished he could abandon the road He was on. Even so He surrendered to his Father, saying, *'Yet not as I will, but as you will'* (Matthew 26:39). In Luke's gospel, we read that He then continued on the road of suffering and was in so much anguish that *'His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground'* (Luke 22:44). Jesus is completely human and as such undergoes His sufferings on our behalf.

This same Jesus, all God and all man, we worship as our Lord. He who gave His life for us, choosing to become a man in order to save us, is the one to whom we entrust ourselves in this life and for all eternity. We invite Him to direct our paths and to lead us. He is everything to us.

**I believe in Jesus Christ, who suffered under
Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell**

The heart of the message of the Bible is that God, in His amazing love for us, decided to reconcile the world and mankind to himself following the separation caused by sin. He will save us and restore us to the purpose for which he originally created us. That purpose was and is for us – and for all of creation – to live peacefully and joyfully with God, each other and all other created things. We cannot save ourselves from the power of sin. Neither could Israel, by keeping God's commands. Therefore, God Himself had to come over to our side and pay the debt. The Judge has paid the penalty He Himself imposed! Paul expresses this beautifully in 2 Corinthians 5:19: *'God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.'*

Redemption from our sins

The road of reconciliation that Jesus travelled for God and for us was a road of humiliation, suffering, death and descent into hell. It is the road each person living without God would eventually have to travel. He died for me, so that I may now live with God. The suffering and death of Jesus were not just physical. He suffered most from taking upon Him the punishment for sin. This punishment is that we should be cut off from God for ever. This is why Jesus' suffering is at its most intense when we hear Him cry out on the cross: *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* (Matthew 27:46). At that moment, all our sins were laid upon His shoulders, He carried with Him all the evil of this world. He who had been declared innocent by Pontius Pilate took our guilt in order to pay for it with his own life on the cross.

Isaiah prophesied about Jesus as the 'suffering servant' in Isaiah 53:5, saying: *'he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.'* In this way Jesus travelled the road of suffering and dying without God, in our place. But as he was

about to die, He knew He was to triumph over sin, the devil and death. So He called out: *'It is finished!'* Reconciliation between God and man was now a fact, the debt had been paid, it was over. With that cry on His lips, Jesus died, committing His spirit into the hands of His Father. Jesus died because He chose to take our death upon Himself. He was buried in order to break through the finality of the grave, which always seems to have the last word.

In its confession of Jesus' suffering and death, the church also states that He descended into hell. This means that no matter how low we may sink, no matter how badly the powers of hell may torment us, we need never be without Jesus. In Psalm 139:8, David sings about this: *'If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths (of hell), you are there.'*

Overcoming evil

Through His suffering and death, Jesus restored our relationship with God, opening the way to life for all who believe in him. But something else happened on the cross as well: it was there that He overcame the power of the devil and the power of sin. Since His death on Calvary, the devil no longer holds our lives in his power. We may still feel his power and notice the presence of sin, but with Jesus we can resist and overcome the devil and sin. Paul says in Romans 6:11-12: *'In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.'* Ever since Jesus' victory on the cross, we have the freedom to choose. Through Him and with Him we can really resist and overcome sinful thoughts, words and actions. We are no longer slaves to the power of sin, but we are children of God. It is no longer sin that rules over our lives, but Jesus. As we become aware of this and entrust ourselves to Him, we will discover that we can indeed *'overcome evil with good'* (Romans 12:21). In this way, Jesus, through His suffering and death, has the final word in our lives!

I believe in Jesus Christ, who on the third day rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty, from which He will return to judge the living and the dead

Risen from the dead

After Jesus spent three days in the grave, the greatest and most beautiful miracle ever took place. This miracle was the turning point in the history of mankind and the world. Jesus Christ rose from the dead! If that had not happened, our sins would have been forgiven thanks to the cross, but we would have remained captive for ever to our old way of life. But Jesus' resurrection marked the beginning of a new life with God. The Bible speaks of a new creation. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says: (*'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!'*.) This 'new' life is a life anchored in God's love and power, a life through the Holy Spirit. It is a life in which the peace and joy of the kingdom are already manifested.

Jesus did not rise on this side of the grave, but on 'the other side'. He did not rise like Lazarus did, to carry on living as before. He rose as a new creation, with a body created for eternity, no longer restricted by time and space. That's why He could be here one moment and somewhere else the next. It explains how He could enter a room through a closed door (John 20:19). Jesus' resurrection marked the beginning of the new life with God, a life no longer subject to sin and death, but led by God's Spirit. It is a life with Jesus that begins here and will continue for all eternity. To us who believe, death is no longer a wall at which every life is brought to a halt, but a doorway into a glorious future with God.

This is why the church rejoices so much on Easter morning. Jesus triumphed over death, God raised him to a new life with Himself that morning. Through the ages this fact has been denied by many, including the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day. But the many

eyewitnesses who testified to his resurrection were not lying. And we who believe in Jesus are aware every day that He is not dead, but alive and reigning.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Pauls deals extensively with the resurrection, explaining why it is so wonderful for us. In verse 20, he writes: *'But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruit of those who have fallen asleep.'* For us who believe, Jesus' resurrection means that we, too, will one day rise from the dead – not after three days, but when Jesus returns. On Easter morning, many believers go to cemeteries to stand among the gravestones singing and rejoicing in the resurrection. One day, on the new earth, we will have resurrection bodies like Jesus has, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15. We will be recognisable, but we will no longer experience limitations or commit sins.

Thanks to Jesus' resurrection from the dead, we can experience that new life with him today. It is an amazing and wonderful experience to sense a peace within your heart that surpasses understanding. To have a deep joy in the midst of brokenness. These are foretastes of the future awaiting us. The victory has been secured, but God's full restoration of creation has not yet been completed. This is why our life with Jesus has its ups and downs, and we still often stumble.

Ascended into heaven

Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus went back to heaven, saying goodbye to His disciples. But Jesus had told them before: *'it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you'* (John 16:7). This Advocate, or Comforter, which is the Holy Spirit, can live in each person's heart.

Jesus' ascension was a farewell for His disciples, but also a glorious entry for Him into heaven. Before He ascended, Jesus said that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him by the Father (Matthew 28:18). Revelation 5 shows us what this means. Having been banned to the island of Patmos, John had a vision in which he heard a voice proclaiming in heaven: *'Who is worthy to*

break the seals and open the scroll?' (verse 2). This is the scroll containing God's wonderful plan for creation and for mankind, the plan of God's kingdom. But the question is followed by silence. No one is able to release this kingdom. At that moment, Jesus appears before John's eyes and before the throne of God. It is the moment of Jesus' ascension and He appears as 'a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain' (verse 6). Then come these beautiful words: 'He (the Lamb) went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne' (verse 7). Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God, from where He reigns over heaven and earth and is busy establishing the kingdom of God, in people, in churches and in more and more places all over the world.

Jesus is the conqueror, He reigns. As of yet, His reign remains hidden: He guides our lives, leads His church and rules over the world, but His rule is not immediately visible. He reigns in a broken world, in which sin, sickness, death and Satan continue to wreak havoc. But through it all, He will have His way with us and with the church. He even said in a parable that the good seed and the weeds will grow up together until the harvest (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43).

Jesus' return

The day of harvest will be the day on which Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. This judgement of the world and of all people will be the final step preceding the breakthrough of His kingdom. Jesus says two things about this judgement. First, we read in John 3:18 that whoever believes in him will not be condemned. Jesus underwent that condemnation in our place on the cross. When Jesus returns as Judge, we will see that our Judge is also our Saviour! Of course, this does not mean we can live any way we want. When he judges the living and the dead, Jesus will want to know whether we took his love and grace seriously. This is stated clearly in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, where Paul teaches us that Jesus is the foundation of our eternal life. So it is certain that we will enter God's kingdom, but the state in which different people enter will vary. At the final judgement, God will look at how we handled the love and grace we received from Jesus and how it affected our lives. Did we

take Jesus seriously, was He able to give us much of his Spirit, or not? Did we allow Him to lead us in what we did and didn't do? This is what Paul means when he speaks of building with gold, silver and costly stones, or wood, hay and straw.

James (2:26) tells us faith without works is dead. If we believe, we must put our faith into practice in daily life. Matthew 25 shows us what God desires to see in us: feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, taking in strangers, clothing the naked, visiting sick people and prisoners. Jesus says: *'Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'* (Matthew 25:40).

I believe in the Holy Spirit

From the very first page of the Bible we read about the Holy Spirit. '*The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters*', it says in Genesis 1:2. In the Old Testament we often encounter the Spirit, but He manifests himself exclusively to small numbers of people, and usually only for short periods of time. For example, the designers of the tabernacle, groups of prophets, Samson, King Saul and King David. God's Spirit gives these people insight into what is happening or what is going to happen. He gives them wisdom for a certain task or equips them to perform a specific assignment. The Spirit shows up here and there, now and then, sporadically.

Pentecost

That changes radically in the New Testament. Jesus told His disciples it was a good thing He was going back to heaven, because it meant the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Counsellor, could come. He is always with us. And at His ascension, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit, saying: '*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*' (Acts 1:8).

Fifty days after Easter, during the great harvest feast in the temple in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit appears. Then God's purposes on earth and with us becomes clear. For one thing, the Spirit now no longer appears sporadically, but there is an *outpouring*. Ever since the first day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God has no longer been only for Israel and a few other individuals, but He moves throughout the whole world, touching people everywhere and causing them to come to faith in Jesus. Whoever believes receives the Holy Spirit, for '*no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit*' (1 Corinthians 12:3). The moment a person receives the Spirit, his or her body becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). That means the Spirit of God dwells within us, seeking to change us from the inside out, to the glory of God. He helps us become more and more like Jesus!

Jesus says this about the work of the Spirit in us: *'He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from Me that He will receive what He will make known to you'* (John 16:13-14). The sole purpose of the Spirit, then, is more of Jesus in our lives. In the church we call this 'sanctification'. He helps us to recognise and confess our sins, to really focus on God in all aspects of our lives, to be one with Jesus. We can do none of that in our own strength, so the Spirit helps us.

How? The Bible offers several clues. It starts with the feast of Pentecost, when the Spirit's appearance is accompanied by wind, fire and many languages. The Spirit is like the wind, Jesus tells us in John 3: *'You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going'* (verse 8). You can tell the Spirit of God has touched you by the fact that you begin to read the Bible differently, to pray differently, to love Jesus more and more.

The second sign of the Spirit at the feast of Pentecost was the appearance of tongues of fire on the heads of the disciples. The Spirit sets us ablaze, He ignites the love of God within us. Listen to what the disciples said who met Jesus on their journey to Emmaus following His resurrection: *'Were not our hearts burning within us?'* (Luke 24:32) That is the work of the Spirit.

The third thing that happened on the feast of Pentecost was that the disciples began to *'declare the wonders of God' in 'other tongues'* (Acts 2). The Spirit enabled them to communicate the gospel of Jesus, God's Word, clearly and comprehensibly.

Filled with the Spirit

The Spirit, then, makes sure that everything Jesus did for us becomes reality in our lives. The Spirit is given to all believers, yet not every believer is full of Jesus. How can this be? It is because we can grieve, quench or resist the Spirit (see, for example, Ephesians 4:30). David did this once by sinning with Bathsheba. In Psalm 51, he laments this period in his life and pleads with God: *'Do not cast me from your*

presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me' (verses 11-12).

So it is possible to drive the Spirit away from your life. If that has happened, the only means of restoration is to confess your guilt and ask for forgiveness. There were two signs telling David the Spirit was absent from his life. First, there was no joy in his heart – that deep joy of knowing you're a child of the Father and that in God you have been given all you need. The Spirit gives that joy. Second, David missed a steadfast spirit. This means being free of doubt and fear, because you know nothing can separate you from the love of Christ – that he is with you and will carry you, no matter what you're going through. The Spirit shows us these things. And these are the things David missed.

The fullness of the Spirit is available to everyone who asks for it and reaches out for it. Paul offers some advice on this in Galatians 6. Having spoken of the fruit the Spirit cultivates in our lives (Galatians 5:22), he says: *'Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life'* (Galatians 6:8). Sowing to please the Spirit means investing in your relationship with Jesus. The Spirit will then see to it that what you sow by reading the Bible, praying or talking about God, will bear fruit in your life. You will discover what Jesus meant when he said: *'Remain in me, as I also remain in you'* (John 15:4).

I believe in one holy, apostolic, Christian church

Right after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the people who had come to faith in Jesus started to meet together. In Jerusalem they formed the first congregation of believers, and the Christian church became a fact. In Acts 2:42-47, we read how these first, Spirit-filled believers lived. Their story shows us the characteristics of a church of Christ. One of the first points mentioned is that they *'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship'* (Acts 2:42). Their faith in Jesus brought them together and they felt a deep bond. Paul often uses the image of a body to discuss this feature. Christ is the head, we are the body. In a human body, all the different parts are interconnected and interdependent. It is the same with the church: every member matters, no member is less needed than others (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). This is in keeping with Jesus' appeal to His disciples to love each other (John 15:17).

The church is one

The first Christians got together almost daily. Three things stood out in their fellowship: they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42). Preaching and biblical teaching were central features, then, along with the celebration of communion and intensive times of prayer. These are still the characteristics of the Church of Christ today, no matter where in the world it is situated: biblical preaching and teaching, joint prayer and the celebration of the sacraments.

Another characteristic of the first church is that *'all the believers were together and had everything in common'* (Acts 2:44). They really looked after each other, avoiding gross economic inequality among the members. The rich sold property and possessions to give to those in need (verse 45). This is how the Church of Jesus is meant to be: a place where people care for one another, bear one another's burdens and share in each other's joys and sorrows (1 Corinthians 12:26). So the church is not made up of people who all belong to the same social class, ethnic group or culture. The family of God, the

body of Christ, is characterised by tremendous diversity and colourfulness. It includes men and women, elderly folk and children, rich and poor, white and black, illiterates and academics. So many differences! But in Christ we are all one. To him each person is as precious as any other, he loves all people equally – and we may do the same. Worldly differences are of no account in the wonderful unity of the church. This amazing unity in diversity is what the Apostles' Creed is talking about when it speaks of one holy, apostolic, church.

The church is holy

The Apostles' Creed also calls the church a holy church. In his letters to the churches, Paul regularly addresses the believers as saints, or sanctified people, for instance in 1 and 2 Corinthians. And then he goes on to deal with all kinds of horrible sins in which some of them were involved. Could the church really be holy? In and of itself, the church is not holy. But its Lord is holy, and through the Holy Spirit the church, or the body of Christ, is sanctified, forgiven, cleansed and transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Holiness is not the status quo, but rather a process of growing in faith, hope and love.

The church is apostolic, which means missional

When the first Christian believers gathered together around the Word and the sacraments, devoting themselves to prayer and to caring for one another, everyone around them noticed. Today, the church still has the same calling: to demonstrate the beauty of living with Jesus by loving one another. In Acts 2:47, we see the secret of a growing church: the believers praised God and enjoyed the favour of all the people: *'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'* This is the secret of a growing, missional church.

Any living fellowship of faith centred on Jesus through the Word, the sacraments, prayer and a life of sharing, will be noticed by its surroundings. And God himself will bring people to the fellowship who wish to become a part of it. The church is intended to grow, to impact its surroundings. This is why a church should never be a closed community, but instead must be open and inviting, drawing

people to come and get to know God together and to receive Jesus.

The church is the place for worshipping God, but that is only half the story; the other half is that we are commissioned to go out and share the gospel of Jesus' love and forgiveness with all people. Being a church always involves those two movements of worshipping God, while also serving our neighbour. This is how Jesus intended his church to be.

I believe in the forgiveness of sins

The tenth article in the Apostles' Creed deals with the forgiveness of sins. It is mentioned specifically as a part of the work of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, as a part of our sanctification. We first came across forgiveness when we looked at Jesus' atoning suffering and death, and now we see it as a part of our daily walk with Him through the Holy Spirit. On the cross, Jesus took the punishment for our sins upon Himself. He will always forgive all of our sins! It is the Holy Spirit who applies this great miracle of grace and forgiveness to our daily lives.

Renewal through the Spirit

'I believe in the forgiveness of sins' is the joyful exclamation of every believer. We know very well that no matter how much we love Jesus, in this life we will keep sinning again and again. The power of sin has been vanquished, yet we personally experience the consequences of evil every day. As Paul sighs in Romans 7:21: *'So I find this law at work: although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.'* Evidently, Paul is so tired of it all that at the end of this chapter he groans: *'What a wretched man I am!'* (Romans 7:24). Thankfully, he does not end there. With sin still stirring itself in his very body as it were, he holds onto his purpose of serving Jesus – and out of that struggle against sin he steps into life through the Spirit in Romans 8. It is the Spirit who controls our lives, not sin. The Spirit helps us to change our sinful will, teaching us to be responsive to His leading. So entrust yourself to God's Spirit. Believe that He dwells within you, and reach out for the renewal of your life through Him.

Confession of guilt

This process of learning from the Spirit, in which he teaches us to resist and overcome sin, often involves profound depths. Forgiveness is always bound up with the confession of guilt. In 1 John 1:8 and 9, the apostle shows us how it works: *'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and*

purify us from all unrighteousness.'

The beauty of confession is that we may believe that our sins will indeed be forgiven, that we have nothing to fear. Whoever confesses is forgiven. There is no condemnation for whoever believes in Christ. Like the prodigal son, who returned to his father and confessed his guilt, we may always return to our Father and confess our sins, in the conviction that thanks to Jesus those sins will be forgiven and blotted out forever from God's judgement of us. Just before in the Apostles' Creed we confess our faith in Jesus' return, we confess that His return will be a great celebration for us, because our sins have been forgiven and we may appear before God without blemish.

I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting

The Apostles' Creed culminates in an expression of the hope in which every believer lives. Christian hope is an intense anticipation of the day when Jesus will return on the clouds, and the new, everlasting life with him on the new earth will begin. This new life has already begun to take shape. In John 17, Jesus says in a prayer to his Father: *'Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent'* (verse 3). But on this earth the new life with Jesus, the new creation, cannot come into full bloom, because the 'weeds' of sin, the devil and death, are still around. This is why we watch and wait for the day when Jesus will come back and the new life with him on the new earth can begin without hindrance. As long as this moment has not arrived, we must wait in heaven after dying. We will be with God there, too, but it will not be our final destination. Heaven is a waiting room, and in Revelation 6:9 and 10 we read that even the souls of those who died as a result of persecution call out, *'How long, Sovereign Lord...?'*

The resurrection body

God's Word and the confession of the church tell us that a day will come when Jesus returns and the dead are raised. The believers will receive a new, glorified body, like Jesus has since his resurrection: a body intended for eternity and fit for our tasks on the new earth. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes extensively about our resurrection bodies. He draws a comparison to the sowing of seed. If you put a seed in the ground, you do not yet know what it will look like when it begins to grow and blossom. That's how it is with our bodies. Our mortal bodies are buried, but we do not know what they will be like once we are raised from the dead to live for ever with God. Paul writes this: *'The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power'* (1 Corinthians 15:42-43). What a wonderful perspective for all who believe! We will live for ever with a perfect body on a new and perfect earth. Just how it will all happen

on the day of Jesus' return, we don't know, but the Bible does offer some clues. Paul, especially, gives us some insight into what will happen when our bodies are raised. In 1 Thessalonians 4, he responds to a question from the church. Its members were worried that those who died before Jesus' return would miss the boat. Paul replies: *'For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words'* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).

A new earth

God's ultimate destination for us is not heaven, but the new earth. That's where His kingdom will be. We read about this new earth at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 21. This passage tells us God will dwell on earth, just as Jesus once did. *"God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."* He who was seated on the throne said, *"I am making everything new!"* (Revelation 21:3-5a).

There has been a lot of speculation and conjecture as to what life on the new earth will be like. Again, we do not know exactly, but the Bible does give us some pointers. To begin with, there will be no sin or evil there. The devil will have been vanquished and banned. This broken creation will have been restored and renewed for good; creation will be perfect, without limitations and vulnerabilities. The earth will be purified with fire; all that is evil and broken will be destroyed and our 'good works' will follow us. The good will remain, all evil will disappear. So many things will be recognisable. Yet all that we recognise will also be completely different, because it will be perfect. This applies to our bodies, too: in our new and perfect bodies, we will be recognisable, yet completely different. But the

most important thing is that God will be '*all in all*' (1 Corinthians 15:28). We will share in his glory, perfect love, fullness of joy and deep peace. It's going to be truly wonderful!

Introduction to the Ten Commandments

In Christian teaching, the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20 have traditionally held an important place. God's purpose is for us to become more and more like Jesus in all we do. Jesus lived a life of holiness. A holy lifestyle is radically different from the lifestyle of a godless person. It means living differently from the way you did before you experienced Jesus' love. What matters is that you put into practice what you receive from God (Philippians 2:12-13). You have been delivered from slavery (Exodus 20:2), saved, so now live accordingly. It is about following *'the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ'* (Ephesians 4:20-21). In the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus calls his disciples to spread the gospel and to gather people into the church through baptism: *'teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'* (verse 20). The key question we must answer when we teach the law is this: how can a Christian put into practice everything Jesus commanded and taught us by example? How can a Christian obey God in day-to-day life?

Both in the Old and the New Testament, the Ten Commandments are viewed as the very heart of God's will for our lives. The Ten Commandments are part of the Torah, the laws and prescriptions God gave in the first five books of the Bible. Many of these laws we no longer keep, such as the sacrificial laws (which were fulfilled through Jesus' death on the cross), the food laws (which were adapted in Acts 10) and the purification laws (*'You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you'*, John 15:3). Yet there is much to learn from these laws. They offer many godly principles, for instance on how to treat farmland with care, how to treat immigrants, poor people and so on.

The church summarises our response to the law in three purposes. The first purpose of the law is to make us aware of our sins (Romans 7:7). The second is to lead us to Christ, who fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17-20). And the third is to provide us with an answer to

the question: Lord, what would you have me do?

Keeping God's law is our life's goal. Jesus says, *'Remain in me, as I also remain in you'* (John 15:4). This means doing his will. It is not a heavy burden, but a joy. A person burdened by the law is behaving the way a slave behaves towards his master's commands. This is not what God intends. After delivering his people from slavery, God gave his laws in order to teach us how to cope with our freedom. It is like the freedom of a child: God does not impose his will on us, instead we are free to *deliberately choose to obey*. Christ made it possible and the Spirit empowers us – but the choice is still ours!

The law is a source of great joy to the person who understands it (Psalms 1, 19 and 119). In Israel the Feast of Tabernacles is followed by a celebration called *Simhath Torah*, or 'rejoicing of the law'. It marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings and the beginning of a new cycle. The person who reads the closing section is called the *Chatan Torah*, the bridegroom of the law. Israel has discovered that the law of God is no less than a marriage course – a course on the practical application of his love and our loving response to it. You could also say: the law cannot do without the gospel, and the gospel cannot do without the law.

The law and the prophets, or God's instructions for our lives, are summed up in a dual commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5, which is later cited by Jesus: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments"* (Matthew 22:37-40). *"Our love for God is a response to His love for us"* (1 John 4:10). We cannot love God without loving our neighbour. Jesus talks about neighbourly love in the parable of the Good Samaritan: it means showing love to whoever you meet on life's road. As a Christian, you are called to love your neighbour as yourself. So loving yourself is part of life, too – not in the sense of selfishness, but of accepting that you are God's child, enjoying your identity and calling in Jesus, realising that your body is

a temple of the Holy Spirit. The law teaches us how to put this love for God and our neighbour into practice: it is the ethic of a life-changing love!

These are the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20:

And God spoke all these words:

² *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

³ *"You shall have no other gods before Me.*

⁴ *"You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

⁷ *"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*

⁸ *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

¹² *"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*

¹³ *"You shall not murder.*

¹⁴ *"You shall not commit adultery.*

¹⁵ *"You shall not steal.*

¹⁶ *"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*

¹⁷ *"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

The first commandment: no other gods besides God

'And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before (or: besides) me"' (Exodus 20:1-3). The first commandment God gives us is to build our lives on nothing and no one other than him. He delivered us from the power of sin to live in freedom with him. We must not backslide into our former, bad habits, thoughts and actions.

Powers

The Bible clearly teaches us, both in the Old and the New Testament, that we live in a world in which powers and forces stronger than us are active. Mankind has been aware of this from of old. In their vulnerability, people have sought to influence these powers and forces by giving them faces or forms and worshipping those forms. People are prepared to sacrifice a lot for this kind of influence. In the Old Testament, Israel was surrounded by nations who worshipped these powers. Think of Baal, for instance, the Philistine god of fertility; Israel was the scene of a long battle between God and this Baal (1 Kings 18).

The powers influencing us are also evident in the New Testament. When Jesus was led into the desert, following his baptism, he was confronted with the satanic forces of wealth, pride and power (Matthew 4). We encounter these forces in our lives today, too. They try to tempt us into trusting other gods than the one God. The force of nature is another example, and many people have worshipped – or still worship – the sun, moon and stars. The power of the economy tempts people into believing that money will make them happy (Matthew 6:25). Jesus mentions the god Mammon, who represents money and possessions. Sexuality and health can also gain power over us – normal things that become gods to us if we serve them and build our lives and happiness on them.

We can also place our trust in people, for instance our ancestors, or

people who impress us. They become like gods to us when we place them above God, expecting him to share his authority over our lives with others. God will not accept that. His love is exclusive, he is committed to us, but in return he expects us to entrust ourselves only to him. With God there is no room for worshipping other gods besides him, or for serving ancestors, nature or other forces. These forces are all very real, they actually exist, but we must turn away from them. In Deuteronomy 6:4-5, this is stated clearly in Israel's most well-known creed: *'Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.'*

Spiritual warfare

The battle against these powers and forces is a daily reality for every believer. We are caught up in a spiritual battle that began in Genesis 3:15, where the hostility between God's children and Satan is described. This battle still rages within and around us. It is a battle against all the powers Satan has at his disposal to draw us away from God. Yet we do not have to fight this battle on our own. Each of the Ten Commandments stands in the light of that opening statement: *'I am the Lord your God who delivered you from slavery.'* With God on our side, we can fight and overcome the powers of darkness. We are not the slaves of gods, we are children of the Most High. In Romans 8:15, Paul says: *'The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry Abba, Father.'*

The second commandment: do not worship God in your own way

'You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments' (Exodus 20:4-6).

While the first commandment focussed on worshipping God only, the second one warns us against worshipping Him in our own way. We are not to make our own image of Him. God cannot be captured by our imagination or thoughts. God is different and greater than we will ever be able to grasp as human beings. If we do create our own image of God, we are short-changing Him in a terrible way. All through the Bible we hear words like those in Isaiah 55:8-9: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

Our own images of God

Throughout the Bible, we see many examples of people who had a wrong image of God. Think of Job, who in his terrible suffering blamed God. He called God to account, God did not match the image Job had of him. When God answered, he simply showed Job that His greatness and power can never be understood. Having heard God's reply, Job realised what he had done: he had created his own image of God. Then he said to God: *'You asked, "Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?" Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. You said, "Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me." My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.'* (Job 42:3-6).

This commandment does not only mean He will not tolerate any other gods besides him. It also means *we must love Him as He is and not as we would like Him to be*. It's like a marriage between a husband and wife. Marital love is exclusive, you can't have a love relationship with another man or woman at the same time. If you're a married man, your wife wants you to love her as she is, not as you would like her to be – that would mean loving your image of her rather than loving her. It would not be a real relationship. Most people would not accept it from their partner, so we certainly cannot expect God to accept it from us.

Generations

God warns us in this commandment that the images we create of Him may not only lead us astray, but will also have consequences for our offspring. He says in this commandment that He allows the guilt of those who hate Him – that is, those who try to use Him for their own purposes – to affect their children to the third and fourth generation. This implies that if parents shape God according to their own ideas, their children will do the same, sometimes for several generations. In God's eyes, this is an expression of hatred of who He really is.

The third commandment: do not negate God's name

'You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name' (Exodus 20:7).

In the third commandment, God offers further instruction on how we are to relate to Him. This time He speaks about our use of His name. A name is not just a word. It stands for who you are. If someone asks who you are, you tell them what your name is. The same applies to God's name. It stands for who He is.

Do not misuse God's name

In the Bible, 'misusing God's name' means, first of all, that we must not swear falsely or inadvertently by His name. A person who makes a promise in God's name must know what he is doing, because he has bound his reliability to that of God. We see this in Christian marriage ceremonies, for instance, when a bride and groom, in the presence of the church of Christ and under God's blessing, exchange vows. They call God to witness. To break these vows is to tarnish God's reliability. You vowed to remain faithful with His help, and failing to do so means you have dismissed His name and therefore His being. So be slow to make promises in God's name, as God will call you to account if you break them.

In the second place, we see in the Bible that using God's name means speaking on his behalf. God speaks through his prophets and servants, but sometimes people proclaim things in God's name that did not originate with Him, but in their own hearts or minds. These people are placing the stamp of God's name on their own ideas and using him for their own purposes. God will never accept that!

This happened in Israel when false prophets appeared, but it is also a very real danger in the church of Christ. Jesus warns us about it in the Sermon on the Mount: *'Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:19).*

This is why Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12:10, speaks of the gift of *'distinguishing between spirits'* in order to know what is, and what is not, of God. Don't say you have received a word from God if you are not absolutely certain. It is not without reason that Paul mentions this in the wider context of all of the gifts given to the church. If one person has a word from God, others must verify it. Present it to the church and listen to what others have to say about it. In that way, you will avoid misusing God's name to validate your own opinions or ideas.

A third way in which we might misuse God's name is when His name is on our lips, but we do not obey Him with our actions. Christians who do not practice what they preach, are guilty of misusing the name of Christ placed upon their lives. All through the Bible, we hear God complain that His people have his name on their lips, while ignoring the fact that the poor continue to die and the weak continue to be oppressed. Amos, speaking in God's name, says: *'Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!'* (Amos 5:23-24). Jesus says the same thing in Matthew 7:21: *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven."* We have the immense honour of being name bearers of God. Let us make sure we live and behave accordingly.

The fourth commandment: a foretaste of the kingdom

'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns' (Exodus 20:8-10)

In the fourth commandment, God instructs us to take a day of rest every week. The Old Testament offers us two motives for this commandment. The first motive, in Exodus 20, is related to creation. God made the earth in six days and rested on the seventh. Therefore God blessed this day of rest, setting it apart from the other days. We can find the second motive in Deuteronomy 5:15, where the Ten Commandments are written down also. Here, Israel is commanded to set apart one day a week for God, not on account of creation, but to commemorate Israel's delivery from slavery in Egypt. You are no longer a slave, your life now consists of more than work: you are also allowed to rest and enjoy, just as God did after His work of creation.

Rest and enjoyment

The Sabbath is kept in different ways by different believers around the world. Jewish people celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday, as God meant them to. Most Christians traditionally celebrate a day of rest on Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection. Some small Christian communities in Islamic countries follow the practice of the society they live in and have their day of rest on Friday. When and how you celebrate a day of rest, then, is determined by your church tradition or cultural context. The Bible leaves us room for these variations. There is not a single, exclusive way of keeping the Sabbath. It is not without reason that Paul says in Romans 14:5: *'One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.'* There is no general rule as to how we are to fulfil this commandment, but the gist of it is the same for every believer: God does not want our lives to consist of work only. His desire for us is

that we regularly and deliberately leave our work to rest and to enjoy all He has given us in Himself, in each other and in creation. On the day of rest, you may stop working and look around you at God's work, realising and rejoicing in the fact that He is the one who will bring all things to fulfilment, He will provide, He will guide.

This *enjoying God* is something we do by meeting with other believers, if possible, to worship God and listen to his Word. To *enjoy one another* means that on the day of rest we consciously spend time with our family, relatives and friends. To *enjoy creation* means to slow down and realise afresh all God has made. One way of doing this on the day of rest, for example, is to take a walk in nature or in the park.

Realising what really matters

With the fourth commandment, God reminds us of the relativity of our work and our striving. A day of rest brings us back to what really matters in our lives. This does not mean you cannot do anything on the Sabbath, rather, it means doing things you enjoy, things that give you pleasure and energy. In this sense, the day of rest is a foretaste of eternal life. The life on the earth that will begin when Jesus returns is also called '*God's rest*' in the Bible (Hebrews 4:9-11). The day of rest we take each week, therefore, reminds us of creation, of our delivery from slavery and of our eternal future. What a joy to bring one's life back into the right perspective every week!

The fifth commandment: honour your parents

'Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you' (Exodus 20:12)

This is the closing commandment in the first section of the Ten Commandments. The first five commandments in this section all deal with man's relationship with God. The second section deals with how people are to relate to each other. It is worth noting that the command to honour one's parents is in the first section on how we are to relate to God. The Bible teaches that parents are representatives of God in their interaction with children. Parents are to take care of their children and lead them on behalf of God. This explains why this commandment is among the first five: it is about honouring God by respecting your parents.

Children, respect grown-ups

In this commandment, God calls us to revere our parents. This means we are to give them the importance they deserve, to take them as seriously as God intends. They are the parents God gave you; he chose them to conceive you, to take care of you, to raise you and to teach you how to live. They also taught you how to live with God, to be His child. You are bound up with them body, soul and spirit. This is why God asks us to honour the generation who initiated our lives, to allow them to go before us rather than having them trail along behind us. The practice of honouring those older than we are recurs throughout Scripture. In Leviticus 19:32, God says: *'Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.'* Here, too, there is a direct relation between respecting those older than we are and honouring God.

Parents, be like Christ

This commandment does not just present children with a responsibility, but parents too. If God gives parents children to raise them up to physical and spiritual maturity on his behalf, their attitudes and conduct should reflect God. Children are instructed to

honour their parents, but parents must not make this difficult for their children.

Paul emphasises this reciprocity in his letter to the Ephesians. Dealing with various issues of authority in the church, the family and the workplace, he also discusses relations between parents and children. Echoing the fifth commandment, his first instruction is addressed to children: *'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right'* (Ephesians 6:1). Paul, too, connects obedience to parents with honouring the Lord. But right after this instruction, Paul addresses parents: *'Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord'* (verse 4). This means that as a parent you must be like Christ, raising your children in the attitude demonstrated by Jesus when He confronted the woman caught in adultery in John 8. Jesus did not overlook her sin, but He did offer her a fair opportunity to change: *'Go now and leave your life of sin'* (verse 11). With Jesus, grace and forgiveness are leading, but his purpose in this is that the person in question will start doing things differently. Parents who raise their children in this spirit reflect something of God. Their children do not become bitter, but are given room to learn from their mistakes and to join their parents in following Jesus.

Sadly, there are countless children in this world who suffer at the hands of their parents. They may be neglected, abused or damaged in another way. Their parents were busy serving themselves rather than their children. Such parents break the fifth commandment. They also mar the image of God in the lives of their children, forfeiting their children's respect. The fifth commandment cannot be applied to these children. When God asks children to show their parents reverence, respect and obedience, His desire is that the parents lead their children in the spirit of Jesus.

A promise

In Ephesians 6, Paul says something special about the fifth commandment: it is the first commandment with a promise (Ephesians 6:2-3). It is indeed remarkable that God adds a promise

to this commandment, saying that *'it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.'* This does not mean you will reach a very old age or live prosperously. It means you will be happy as a result of having a good relationship with your parents. If your parental home is a place of peace and security and if you continue to honour your parents, to visit them, to listen to their advice, you will enjoy greater stability and rest in your life. You will realise you are part of a greater whole and that you stand on the shoulders of your forebears.

The sixth commandment: do not murder

'You shall not murder' (Exodus 20:13)

This commandment seems obvious. Of course it is wrong to kill another person; even those who do not believe in God acknowledge that. So why does God expressly include this commandment? Because he is addressing an issue that is far broader than that of murder. With this law, God is prohibiting everything that can precede murder. The act of murdering someone is just the tip of the iceberg; the underlying issues are not directly visible, but they certainly exist. With this commandment, God wishes to completely remove all murderousness from among us.

Murder comes from anger

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that murder comes from anger. In Matthew 5 from verse 17, he speaks of the fulfilment of the law, explaining that the Ten Commandments go far beyond the mere words. They also cover those areas from which sinful deeds spring forth. This is why, on commenting on the sixth commandment, He says: *'But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment'* (Matthew 5:22). Jesus is pointing out that the root of murder goes back to an angry heart. Allow that anger to fester and it will culminate in deadly hatred. That's why anger is just as wrong as murder. The underlying feeling is the same and if it is dealt with, the results can be fatal.

This does not necessarily mean literally killing another person. That is the most extreme expression of murder, but you can 'kill' a person in subtler ways. For example, you can ruin someone's life by speaking evil of him or her. You can break a person down by ignoring him or her. Even looks can 'kill'. In all of these examples, you are making it clear that you consider another person's life to be of no value. Whenever this happens, whenever you hear that evil little voice inside you or feel that fire burning within you, you are breaking the sixth commandment. The apostle John writes: *'Anyone who*

hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him' (1 John 3:15).

Overcome evil

The commandment 'You shall not murder' resounds throughout the Bible as an appeal to overcome evil and do good to others. Stop giving anger, envy and hatred a place in your life. They separate you not only from your neighbour, but also from God. This is why Jesus says: *'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift'* (Matthew 5:23-24). Angry people cannot pray! 'In your anger do not sin: do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold' (Ephesians 4:26).

The seventh commandment: do not destroy a marriage

'You shall not commit adultery' (Exodus 20:14)

The second section of the Ten Commandments deals with loving your neighbour as yourself. This means respecting the other person's life. It also means respecting another person's marriage, God tells us in this seventh commandment. The instruction not to commit adultery is not primarily aimed at protecting your own marriage, but the marriages of others. If you commit adultery, you will destroy another person's marriage in the first place and your own in the second.

Marriage is a covenant

The protection of marriage is a central issue to God. We see this all through the Bible. The commandment not to destroy a marriage relationship carries as much weight as the commandment not to take someone's life. With God, murder and divorce carry equal weight, for anyone ruining a love relationship destroys two lives.

We must also note that marriage is not a random way in which a man and a woman can enter into a relationship. Rather, it is a God-ordained covenant between a man and a woman. This covenant reflects the covenant God has made with us. It shows us how He wishes to bind himself to us. This means that in marriage we are to treat one another as God treats us. It also means we are to treat God as we treat a marriage partner. This covenant relationship, in which love and faithfulness go hand in hand, is the kind of relationship God desires. Whenever a relationship of this nature is threatened by romantic entanglements and sexuality outside of marriage, the covenant is broken and God's covenant is marred.

Where is the boundary?

This commandment addresses the various degrees of adultery, which culminate in divorce. Again, Jesus shows us that sin often

begins as something small and insignificant. In Matthew 5:28, He comments on this commandment, saying: *'But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'* So it begins with how we look at someone. The line between good and evil is very thin here. Looking at someone of the opposite sex and observing that he or she is beautiful is fine. But if you go on to fantasise about having sex with that person, you have crossed the line. In other words, we must be very conscious of how we look. Job puts it this way: *'I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman'* (Job 31:1). Jesus speaks about this lustful way of looking in Matthew 5:29: *'If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.'* It begins with looking at another person. If you do not control your looks, you will soon deliberately arouse the flame of sexual desire, either by flirting or by sharing too much time or intimacy with the other person. All of these things are a threat to the other person's marriage as well as to your own. This is why the seventh commandment forbids adultery: adultery is a form of breaking the covenant of marriage.

Divorce is an abhorrence in God's eyes, as it is for those directly involved and for the families destroyed by it. This is why God forbids divorce. Divorce is the impossible possibility. Jesus emphasises this again in Matthew 19:4-9, when He is questioned about divorce. The fundamental principle is that man should not separate what God has joined together. Moses opened the door to divorce by means of a certificate of divorce. He did this with a view to preventing people from divorcing randomly and easily. Jesus points out that divorce was never meant to be, not even in the days of Moses, but that Moses introduced the certificate of divorce as a means of restraining evil (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

The eighth commandment: do not keep everything for yourself

'You shall not steal' (Exodus 20:15)

Following the commandments to protect the lives and marriages of our neighbours, comes a commandment to protect our neighbour's possessions. Why does God add theft to the list of murder and adultery? Surely, stealing is less extreme than those other things? Again, we must listen carefully to what the Bible is teaching us. Stealing someone's possessions is no minor misdemeanour. The Bible compares theft with robbing a person of the opportunity to live. A person's possessions represent his means of staying alive. His home, his tools – all of these are means of survival. Stealing these things, then, is paramount to threatening his survival. In its broader meaning, therefore, the commandment 'You shall not steal' means we must not make it impossible for another person to continue living.

Give every person a fair chance

In the Bible, wealthy people are often accused of stealing from the poor. The prophets rebuke city dwellers for stealing from country folk. Wherever people live together, there will be inequality. Usually, the rich get richer, while the poor get poorer. The rich, in other words, tend to make it difficult for the poor to survive, which means they are breaking the eighth commandment. The opposite of stealing from our neighbour is to offer him a fair chance to make a living like us. It doesn't mean everyone must have equal wealth, but that everyone deserves an equal chance at working to support himself. The many laws in Leviticus, in which the Ten Commandments are worked out in more detail, are aimed primarily at the protection of the weak, the poor, the widows and orphans. The establishment of the Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25) is aimed at giving those stuck in their situation room to manoeuvre and a fair chance at rebuilding an independent existence.

The biblical concept of stealing also includes keeping everything for yourself. The evils of avarice and greed are deeply rooted in man. In 1 Timothy 6:10, Pauls says: *'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.'* It is this lust for money, this desire for more, that causes us to forget others or to let them sink further into poverty. This explains the instruction in Leviticus 19:9-10: *'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.'* In 1 Timothy 6, again, Paul says: *'Command them [those who are rich] to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share'* (verse 18).

The ninth commandment: do not gossip

*'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour'
(Exodus 20:16)*

Following the commandments to protect our neighbour's life, marriage and possessions, this ninth commandment calls us to protect his or her name, or identity. Giving someone a bad name means you are undermining his or her position in society. This is why one of the Ten Commandments deals with how we speak about others.

No false testimony

This commandment deals first and foremost with how we speak of other people in court. If you are called on as a witness, you can make or break another person's life. Your testimony can lead to that person's condemnation or acquittal. So your testimony in court gives you a lot of power over your neighbour's life. At these moments, when your words give you power over others, it is vital that you are reliable and sincere. A believer speaks and acts with integrity. You must not allow your sympathy, or antipathy, towards your neighbour to influence your testimony or judgement. In Leviticus 19:15 and 16, this commandment is dealt with in more detail: *'Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. I am the LORD.'*

Do not gossip

The text in Leviticus 19 shows us that the ninth commandment does not only apply in court, but also in daily life. We must always be aware of the power of words. This theme keeps recurring throughout the Bible. In Proverbs, Solomon often touches on it: *'The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit'* (Proverbs 18:21). The apostle James also writes extensively about how we speak: *'With the tongue we praise our Lord and*

Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness' (James 3:9). In other words, if we praise God, while speaking ill of other people, we are hypocrites.

As we saw in looking at other commandments, the line between good and evil can be very thin. Talking about others is fine, gossiping is not. Gossip aims at tearing a person down, at maligning him or her. Speaking ill of another person is the same as giving false testimony. This does not mean we are to whitewash everything people do or say. What matters is the intention with which we say things. Are you aiming at breaking a person down, or building him or her up? If we love our neighbour as ourselves, we can question another person's behaviour or attitudes with the intention of building him up. If that is not your purpose, it is better to keep quiet.

The upside of this commandment is that it teaches us that we can build each other up with words, we can bless each other. This is what Paul means in Ephesians 4:29: *'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.'*

The tenth commandment: do not covet what belongs to someone else

'You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour' (Exodus 20:17)

The tenth commandment moves beyond the previous commandments dealing with the protection of our neighbour. In those commandments, we are told to keep our hands off our neighbour's life, marriage and good name. This tenth commandment appears to repeat that, but its reach is broader and deeper. In the tenth commandment, God shows us the root of all those sins against our neighbour: covetousness. It is this same covetousness, this greed for more power and possessions, that brought sin into paradise. And beneath it lurks pride: in the final analysis, it is pride that drives us to harm our neighbour. The smaller we make our neighbour, the greater we become ourselves – and that is our ultimate human desire.

Covetousness

James paints a clear picture of how covetousness operates in our lives: *'(...) each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death'* (James 1:14-15). Covetousness, or greed, is a force in our lives that we must resist and overcome. We can do this by nipping it in the bud, by recognising the desire, confessing it and resisting it in the power of God.

The tenth commandment teaches us that covetousness centres on desiring what our neighbour has. If your neighbour has something good, you want it, too – at the expense of your neighbour, if necessary. This commandment covers the entire breadth of our neighbour's well-being. Do not damage anything in which he finds joy, God says. This wellbeing is represented by three specific things in the tenth commandment: our neighbour's house, wife and cattle.

They represent his circle of relatives and friends, his marriage and family, and his work and income. A person's daily existence and happiness hinge on these things. Therefore, do not touch them, God says. Do not even look at them covetously or jealously. Be happy if your neighbour is happy and do not seek your own happiness in wanting to have the things he has.

Contentment

The tenth commandment points out that a life with God is a life of contentment. It means realising that all we have comes from God's hand, and being thankful – even if we have received less than our neighbour has. Paul speaks about this contentment in his first letter to Timothy. Having warned against the desire for more money, he writes: *'But godliness with contentment is great gain'* (1 Timothy 6:6). Contentment is the best remedy for covetousness. If we realise the riches of grace and goodness God has given us in Jesus, we will stop coveting what belongs to our neighbour. We will know that true joy and true riches are found in living with God.

Our Father – Introduction

Prayer is the breath of faith. Prayer connects us to God and keeps us connected. Prayer is about tuning in to God, aligning our lives with him. Prayer is sharing everything with our heavenly Father, both our joy and thankfulness and our cares and questions. This is why a prayer can be an expression of praise and worship one moment and a plea or lament the next. In all of this, prayer means turning to God.

But prayer is not just talking to God, it is also listening to God. More than conversation, it is having fellowship with God, consciously being in his presence. When loved ones come together, they talk a lot, they share their lives. But the best moments are those in which words are not necessary, in which they simply enjoy one another's nearness. This is what our prayer times with God can be like. As children of the heavenly Father, we can spend time and share everything with him, but we can also simply enjoy his presence. This is prayer without words. In this peace and quiet, this intimate fellowship with God, you will sometimes hear his voice speaking to you, through a Bible verse, a song or a thought that comes to mind. This, too, is part of prayer.

Praying to God, then, is not primarily about getting results, but about developing a relationship! As we pray, we entrust our lives to him, we humble ourselves before him in the realisation that he is the Father and we are the children. We know that Jesus has been given all power in heaven and on earth, and in this confidence we share our lives with him. There are many things we do not understand, many situations we do not fully grasp, and reality often differs from our dreams and longings, yet through prayer we keep trusting God to care for and to guide us and this world. To pray is to yield, to trust, to draw near to God in every situation, with thanksgiving or with a plea, always placing ourselves in his loving care.

If we can share everything with God in prayer, we can also ask him anything, we can pray for everything. James rebukes the believers he

is addressing in his epistle for not taking everything to God: *'You do not have because you do not ask God'* (James 4:2b). Of course, God knows what we need, even if we do not ask him. *He longs for us to tell him our needs, because it is a way of sharing our vulnerability with him and giving him an opportunity to draw near. It is like a love relationship. You appreciate it when your partner, or children, share their struggles with you, because it opens the door to friendship, support or advice, and going through trials together will strengthen your bond.*

The second thing James says about prayer is that God does not answer prayers based on wrong motives: *'When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures'* (James 4:3). Prayer is not a means of getting God to fulfil our desires for more, better, bigger and so on. The focus of prayer is to honour God and to receive a blessing for ourselves and for others. Blessings are not the same as success or possessions. If you pray for a greater blessing, you will be blessed and honour God for it. If you pray for more success, you are asking with wrong motives. God is our heavenly Father and will not give his children things that are not good for us, even if we think they are.

It is possible, then, for a believer to pray too little, or wrong. Not every prayer is automatically right. Together, we may learn to pray the way God intends us to. When the disciples noticed how much prayer meant to Jesus, they asked him to teach them to pray. In Luke 11, they saw Jesus praying and said to him: *'Lord, teach us to pray'* (verse 1). Jesus then taught them what is now known as 'The Lord's Prayer'. You can also find it in Matthew 6:9-13. As he shows them how to prayerfully entrust themselves to their Father, he teaches them these words, this prayer that to this day is prayed by Christians all over the world. It is a prayer that teaches us how to pray to God's glory, how to have fellowship with him. In the following chapters, we will look at this prayer line by line.

The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be Your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one*

*for Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.*

Chapter 24

Daddy

'Our Father in Heaven' (Mathew 6:9)

The way God is addressed as Father here reveals such a beautiful message. Already in the Old Testament, God manifests Himself as a Father to His children. Paul puts it this way: *'(...) the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father"'* (Romans 8:15). The Spirit teaches us to so trust in God's love that when we pray, it is as if we walk into God's presence, saying, *'Hello, Daddy.'* This intimacy can grow as we live with God, and prayer plays an important part in this. This secret of talking to God as with a loving Father is one of the greatest secrets a Christian can discover.

In heaven

God's Fatherhood shows us how near He is to us. He is the Father. However, in the same breath, Jesus adds that he is our Father *'in heaven'*. God the Father is high and lifted up, He is and always will be the omnipotent Creator of heaven and earth. This is a tremendous comfort: the one to whom we pray is enthroned in heaven and is stronger and mightier than anyone or anything else on earth. It also helps us to see that our Dad expects and deserves profound respect. He is in heaven, which means we cannot grasp, calculate or predict anything about him. All we know for sure is that he loves us, holds our lives in his hands and that we may confidently place ourselves and our world in his care. This is why we begin our intimate fellowship with God in prayer by reverently and gratefully saying: *'Abba, Father in heaven.'*

Our Father

In closing this chapter, it is good for us to realise that Jesus reminds us right at the beginning of our prayer that we are not the only ones who believe and pray. God is not just my Father, He has also given me countless spiritual brothers and sisters. When I pray, I do so in fellowship with them, I am a part of God's world-wide kingdom – and I am reminded of this each time I begin my prayer with *'our Father'*. God has placed me in His family, and together we pray to Him!

God first

'Hallowed be your name' (Matthew 6:9)

In praying to our Father, Jesus instructs the disciples and us to start with properly focusing on Him. Our lives do not revolve around us. The first place is not ours, but God's. This is what Jesus meant in Luke 14:26, when He said: *'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be My disciple.'* Hallowing God's name means giving God the first place, giving Him top priority. So we begin our prayer by asking God to help us to truly focus on Him, before we ask or share anything ourselves. *'Father, make my life to be honouring unto You. May You be the first and the last in my life, may You be everything to me.'* This is what we ask in this first part of the Lord's Prayer.

By praying this, we acknowledge that this attitude cannot be taken for granted in our lives. Again and again, we tend to set our own priorities. But by deliberately focussing on God, we ask him to set us straight first, so that we will give honour where honour is due. To hallow God's name, then, means to acknowledge who God is and to honour and worship him accordingly.

The glory of his name

When we ask the Father for his name to be hallowed in our lives, we are asking for a greater awareness of *'how wide and long and high and deep'* the love of God is, as we see it in Christ (Ephesians 3:18 and 19). The more meaning God's name takes on in our lives, the more we will honour and thank him in everything. The realisation that God is present in all his power and might will compel us to do what Paul recommends in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: *'Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.'*

As our awareness of who God is grows, we will approach Him in prayer with greater reverence, dependence and trust. This first part of the Lord's Prayer firmly places God on the throne and puts us in our place.

Build Your kingdom

'Your kingdom come' (Matthew 6:10)

In this second part of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God – a topic He addressed from His very first sermon. His whole life, death and resurrection stood in the context of the kingdom of God. The purpose of His saving work was to restore God's kingship on earth. The kingdom of God is central to everything. Everything in God's plan is aimed at restoring His lordship. In this part of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray that God will continue his work, the advancement of his kingship, to include more and more people and parts of the earth.

... in my personal life

This means, first and foremost, that we must ask God to allow His influence and authority to grow in our personal lives. Our prayer is that His kingship will be more and more visible and noticeable in our daily existence, that we will obey Him more and more deliberately, that we will allow His will and His Word to guide our lives. Build your kingdom and begin in me!

... in the church

It also means we must pray for the church, as it is God's instrument for making His kingdom visible. Wherever the church is, God is. He plants his church all over the world in order to use it as a means of manifesting and spreading his love and grace. A prayer for the coming of God's kingdom, therefore, is also a prayer that the church of Christ will remain steadfast and grow. *'Let your kingdom advance in the world and equip your church to play its part.'*

... in the world

The third truth we confess when we pray this prayer is that God's kingdom is not of this world, it is the world turned upside down. Yet its purpose is to renew this world. The kingdom is not *of* this world, but it does exist *for* this world. God's plan of salvation includes the

whole of creation, man and animals, heaven and earth. So the way in which we treat creation certainly matters. If we pray for the advancement of God's kingdom on earth, therefore, we also pray for the restoration of everyday things in our everyday earthly lives. Right here and now, in the common, day-to-day things, God wishes to manifest his glory and goodness.

Your will be done

'Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6:10)

Following up on the second petition in the Lord's Prayer for the advancement of the kingdom, Jesus teaches us in the third section to submit ourselves to the guidance of the Father. If we pray for God's will to be done in heaven and on earth, we are praying, in the first place, that we will learn to do God's will. Jesus set the example in a profound way when He prayed this prayer at one of the toughest moments in His life. In the garden of Gethsemane, God held out to Him the cup of His wrath over the sins of man. Jesus, having fallen to the ground, pleaded with God up to three times: *'Abba, Father,'* He said, *'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will'* (Mark 14:36). Facing a terrible death, Jesus begged for a way out, yet at the same time He gave himself over entirely to the will of His Father. This prayer, *'Your will be done'*, resounds with an absolute trust in God. It says: Lord, I trust you completely!

Knowing God's will

In the church, a distinction is often made between God's revealed will and his hidden, or sovereign, will. We can read His revealed will in his Word. A good example can be found in Micah 6:8: *'He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'* God's will is clear and is revealed to us in the Ten Commandments, Jesus' Sermon on Mount and many other parts of the Bible. Whenever we pray for God's will to be done, we are asking God to help us do as He has told us. It is, primarily, a prayer of obedience to God's will in our everyday lives. It is about putting into practice the will of God in our daily work, in our relationships and in the common experiences of day-to-day life.

God's will also has a hidden, or sovereign, side. We can seek it in specific situations or when we face important decisions in life. Finding it requires an intimate relationship with God. You can

discover His will if you are open to what God says to you through His Word, His Spirit or your own thoughts. As the Psalmist sings: *'Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths'* (Psalm 25:4). This is a learning process, a matter of gradually familiarising yourself with who God is and what He wants. Often it takes patience. Rather than making things happen your way, you wait until you are absolutely certain you know what God wants from you.

Many of us have the tendency to run ahead of Jesus, like Peter did, to go ahead and do things our way. When we do, we need correcting, like Peter did: *'Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns'* (Matthew 16:23). The Psalms show us that discovering God's will in our lives is a matter of trust: *'Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this'* (Psalm 37:5). As you pray for clarity and move forward, taking decisions in faith, God will show you His will, one way or another.

A bit of heaven on earth

It is worth noting that Jesus adds 'on earth as it is in heaven'. God's ultimate purpose is that heaven and earth will once again become one, that the heavenly life and the earthly life will be connected. God is to be increasingly obeyed and served on earth, just as He already is in heaven. Wherever God's will is put into practice, we see a little bit of heaven on earth, we catch a glimpse of the nearness of God that one day will be complete. In Revelation 21:3, John writes: *'And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them".'* Wherever God's will is carried out, we are given a foretaste of this dwelling with God.

Pray for everyday things

Give us today our daily bread' (Matthew 6:11)

Having instructed us to pray for the honour of God, the advancement of God's Kingdom and the universal performance of His will, Jesus now directs our prayers toward our everyday lives. Whoever lives in fellowship with God will soon discover the wonder of the commonplace. Christianity makes no fundamental distinction between the natural and the supernatural. God became man, thus embracing every aspect of human existence. The incarnation of Jesus offers the ultimate affirmation that God created all things and, therefore, will re-create all things. Nothing is too small or insignificant for God. That means we can share everything with him. In Matthew 10:29-30, Jesus talks about sparrows and about the hairs on our head. In Jesus' life, there is a lot of attention for food and drink. He enjoys eating and drinking with other people and breaking bread with the crowds. In the coming Kingdom, there will also be a great feast. As a foretaste of that, he encourages us in the Lord's Prayer to ask God for our daily bread.

Daily bread in this prayer represents our basic needs in terms of food and drink, shelter, work, income and possessions. This prayer is about our earthly concerns, big and small. Sometimes we are entangled by these cares, but if we prayerfully take them to God, we gain a clearer view, the knot comes undone, things begin to fall into place.

Living one day at a time

It is interesting that Jesus tells us to pray for our 'daily' bread. On the one hand, this is a reference to the bread we need today (in Matthew's version), and on the other hand it refers to our need for bread every day (in Luke's version). This prayer covers both aspects. As we trust God to provide for the acute needs we have today and to do so again tomorrow, we no longer need to lay up stores for ourselves. This principle is demonstrated when Israel receives manna from God in the desert. It is their daily bread, that is, it meets

the needs of today. The Israelites were not allowed to save manna for the next day, except on the eve of the Sabbath (Exodus 16). They had to learn to trust God for their daily bread. In the same spirit, Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:31 not to worry about what we will eat or drink tomorrow, or what we will wear, as our heavenly Father knows we need these things. This means that when we pray for our daily bread, asking God to meet the needs of this day, we do not have to anxiously beg him, but instead we can confidently approach the One who cares for us. He will do it today and every day of our lives.

Everything comes from His hand

Daily bread signifies what you really need. We are instructed to pray for bread, not for cake. But if we receive our bread from God's hand, knowing how much he cares for us and how much peace and quietness this gives us, our bread begins to taste like cake! The Bible does not give us a boundary, telling us how much to ask. We are encouraged to share everything with God, all our needs. We ask in the name of Jesus. This helps us to pray in accordance with what Jesus would ask: not for greater wealth or more possessions, but for what we need in order to live and function properly in our surroundings. Praying for our daily bread means recognising that without God we can do nothing, that everything we are and have comes from his hand. It is sharing our day- to-day existence with our Father.

Confessing guilt

*'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors'
(Matthew 6:12)*

In the fifth part of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray for another daily need: forgiveness of sins. As children of the Father, we know we must love God above all else and our neighbour as ourselves. In day-to-day life, however, we discover again and again how easily we give ourselves the first place, following our own passions and simply forgetting God.

Yes, we sin every day. This is why Jesus tells us not only to pray for our daily bread, but also for daily forgiveness. Our sins accumulate, leaving us indebted to God and our neighbour. In this prayer, Jesus teaches us that we must confess our sins, even though we are God's children and we know our sins are forgiven. If we neglect this confession, we may forget that we continue to sin. John says: *'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'* (1 John 1:8). Confession, therefore, is an essential part of our prayer life. Without it, we cannot maintain an open, honest relationship with God. Only in confession do we find room to receive grace and forgiveness again and again.

Truly confessed, truly forgiven

Confessing guilt is not superficially ticking off all the wrongs we have done. It is a deep awareness of what our sins signify. David shows this awareness in Psalm 51, when he confesses that he has sinned with Bathsheba. In verses 3 and 4, he prays: *'For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.'* David realises that the sins we commit against other people always pierce God's heart too. When we sin, we go against His will, His purposes. We can see this same awareness at the return of the prodigal son in the parable in Luke 15. He, too, says in his confession to his father: *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer*

worthy to be called your son' (verse 21). To those who confess guilt like this, realising how their guilt affects their neighbour and God, the Bible offers wonderful promises. Both in Psalm 51 and in Luke 15, we see examples of the principle so powerfully described by John: *'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness'* (1 John 1:9). The Bible offers 100% certainty that this prayer will be answered. Whoever has prayed this prayer, may rise up and continue afresh.

Forgiving others

Jesus adds one clear condition to all of this. You will only receive forgiveness from God if you are prepared to forgive others who have sinned against you. In his teachings on earth, Jesus stresses this several times. In the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:23-35), Jesus highlights this. In this story, a servant owes a king a large amount of money. The king cancels the debt. The servant then runs into someone else, who owes him a tiny debt, which he refuses to cancel. When the king finds out, he is furious and orders the servant to pay off his large debt after all. Jesus ends this parable with these words: *'This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart'* (Matthew 18:35). You can only ask for forgiveness if you are prepared to give it.

Our debts

Again, Jesus speaks of we and us in this part of the prayer. When we ask God for something, we are not to ask just for ourselves, but to involve those who belong to us, such as our family and church. We pray for *our* bread, we confess *our* sins. We cannot pretend one person's sin does not affect anyone else. Sin affects the whole community. We find a clear example of this in Nehemiah. While serving at the court in Babel, Nehemiah receives news of trouble among the returned exiles in Jerusalem. Then he prays to God: *'I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you'* (Nehemiah 1:6). Although he is not directly accountable for what has happened, Nehemiah realises he is part of a greater whole and carries his part of the responsibility. This is why, we, too, must pray: forgive us *our* debts!

Chapter 30

Temptation

'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one' (Matthew 6:13)

As believers we know from experience that our lives are the scene of a spiritual battle between God and the devil. We have been saved by Jesus' death on the cross, but the final capitulation of Satan and of evil will not take place until the return of Christ. Until then, the devil will continue to have a lot of power. Jesus calls him *'the prince of this world'* (John 14:30 and 16:11). The apostle Peter warns us to always be on our guard against evil: 'Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8). One of the ways in which the devil tries to lure us away from God is temptation. Temptation can come to us through external forces that draw us away from God. Jesus gave an example of this when He spoke of *'the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth'* (Matthew 13:22). But temptation can also come from within, through things stirring in our hearts, such as doubts about God and faith, or persistent sins that seem to be ineradicable.

Jesus knows our hearts. He knows how vulnerable we are to the devil's temptations. This is why He teaches us to pray that God will keep us from these temptations and deliver us from the evil one and from the powers of darkness. As we pray for this, we must, of course, realise that no temptation comes from God or is sent our way as a test of faith and a means of drawing us closer to him. That is definitely not the case, James tells us: *'When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone'* (James 1:13). James stresses each person's individual responsibility for coping with temptation: *'but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death'* (James 1:14-15). This is another warning that we must take temptations seriously and pray to God all the more deliberately that he will protect us from them. This is the prayer of a child in a

storm asking his dad to hold his hand.

Jesus encourages us to pray for complete delivery from evil and the evil one. We can already be conquerors in this world; thanks to Jesus, we can resist and overcome sin and temptation. Yet the fact that the battle never ends, that sin is always lurking, that the pull of evil is always there and that we must always be on our guard can wear us out. This is why we join Paul in eagerly awaiting the moment at which our vanquished enemy will finally disappear: *'(...) we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies'* (Romans 8:23). Whenever we pray *'Deliver us from evil'*, we are longing for that day and praying for its hastening.

The first Christians, many of whom were fiercely persecuted for their faith, also shared a deep longing for the final delivery from the evil one. The apostle John, after having been banned to the island of Patmos for his faith, received an amazing vision for the persecuted church and for all battle-weary Christians. In Revelation he describes what he saw, lifting a tip of the veil for us. This is how we know that prior to the final delivery, the devil will continue to wreak havoc. But the book of Revelation also tells us how we will eventually be taken away and how God's children will be protected during this final battle. Revelation is a book of comfort for believers longingly praying for delivery from the evil one!

'For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.'

This final exclamation of praise is not in Mathew's description of the Lord's Prayer, but these words certainly fit well. As we contemplate the contents of the Lord's Prayer, we glimpse something of the greatness and goodness of God and are filled with a deep gratitude. That what is expressed in the last sentences of the Lord's Prayer as we know it.

Part 4

Pastoral Care

Part 4 : Pastoral care

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Introduction to part 4

Pastoral care

I wrote this chapter on pastoral care, bearing in mind that different countries and cultures have different understandings of what pastoral care involves. Culture often has a huge influence on how pastoral care is given. In western cultures there is usually a high degree of openness between a pastor and his church members and people talk about their problems and vulnerabilities more easily than in eastern or southern cultures. From my many conversations with pastors in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia I have learned a lot about the sensitivities and possibilities that characterise different cultures.

Pastoral leadership

A shepherd does not only lead his flock in the right direction, he also makes sure they stay together and that each individual animal can keep up. In Ezekiel 34:4, God rebukes the leaders of Israel for neglecting this side of their role as shepherds of the people: strengthening the weak, healing the sick, binding up the injured, bringing back the strays and searching for the lost. These things are part of the shepherd's responsibility as a caregiver; they are what make a leader a true pastor.

In Luke 15:3-6, Jesus shares a parable in which He highlights the responsibility a shepherd has for taking care of each individual sheep. A shepherd leaves his flock of 99 sheep behind in the open country and goes after one lost sheep. A shepherd must lead the flock, but the words of Jesus suggest that when troubles come caring for each individual animal takes priority over leading the whole flock. Even if only a single sheep is missing, or cannot keep up, the flock stays put. In this parable Jesus teaches us that pastoral care is an indispensable part of leadership. Every leader, first and foremost, is a pastor!

This means that, like Jesus, you will go to great lengths to comfort, encourage and support the people whom God has entrusted to you. Pastoral care means not letting go of a person who needs you, but being faithful. In 1 Corinthians 4:2, Paul says that those serving the church on behalf of God must be faithful. They have to be dependable, you have to know they will keep their promises and be as good as their word. In pastoral care, people do not just share their deepest secrets with the pastor, they put their very soul in his care. He is allowed to care for their soul, to touch their inward being. The relationship goes further than a doctor-patient relationship. A doctor touches his patient's body, a pastor touches the soul. It takes a lot of trust in the pastor for a person to receive pastoral care. He or she must feel confident that the pastor will not just keep to himself what is confided to him, but also that he will know how to handle it

wisely. Consciously or not, your church members see you as a representative of Jesus. You come to them in the name of Jesus, therefore they will expect you to act like Jesus would. Your trustworthiness will depend on the extent to which you reflect Jesus in the way in which you speak and listen!

This is what makes pastoral conversations unique. Pastoral care is not like therapy, which focuses exclusively on the person and his or her circumstances. In therapy the focus is inward. Neither is pastoral care the same as preaching. Preaching is one-way traffic: through preaching God speaks to us. In pastoral care there is certainly a place for sharing the Word of God, but first we must listen. As a pastor, you listen to what your brother or sister shares with you and then respond, drawing on the knowledge and experience you have of walking with God. You learn the art of double listening, giving your full attention to the person who has come to you for counselling, while at the same time listening to what God's Spirit tells you to say in response to what has been shared with you. In pastoral care, then, the focus is not just inward, but upward as well. Pastoral care moves from the inside up, as we take people's troubles to God.

What is pastoral care?

In order to understand the pastor's assignment, we must first have a clear understanding of pastoral care. It often helps to start out by considering what pastoral care is *not*. Pastoral care does not mean you solve all the problems of the people in your care. A lot of pastors have that tendency. Someone will come to you with a certain problem and your first instinct is to start looking for a solution. You want to be there for that person, you want to help. And a lot of people will indeed see you as their last resort. You have to know your own boundaries, especially when it comes to practical matters, such as finances, housing, problems with the government, material or legal issues. What you can do, however – and this may go a lot deeper than mere problem solving – is to come alongside that person in his difficulties. This involves listening to their his story, his complaint, his fears or sorrows. It means empathising, feeling what he feels, and joining him in opening the Bible to seek hope and strength in order to remain standing.

As a pastor you are clearly not called to remove suffering. Jesus did not do that when He was on earth. He healed the sick and helped those who came to him, but he did not take away the suffering of this world. In John 17:15 he prays: (*'My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one'*). Jesus overcame the evil and brokenness of this life when he died on the cross, but it will not be taken away until He returns. Until that day God's children, too, will face suffering, anxiety and sorrow. However, the miracles Jesus performed do show us that He is stronger than sin, that He can heal what is broken, that nothing is too difficult for him. That is how He gave us hope and perspective, showing us that our troubles and cares will not have the final say in our lives, but that he will.

Pastoral care, then, can be defined as follows:

Pastoral care is drawing near to another person in the name of Jesus in order to seek hope and renewal of life

together in his or her situation.

To begin with, therefore, it is important that you introduce the presence of Jesus to the situation, as you are there on His behalf. He commissioned you when He said: *'Take care of My sheep, feed My lambs'* (John 21:15-17). You can only represent Jesus as a pastor if you are truly connected to Him yourself. Ministering to others begins with ministering to your own soul. Paul instructed pastors in the same way: *'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock'* (Acts 20:28). Being a pastor in Jesus' name requires that you enjoy intimate fellowship with him. A pastor desiring to listen not only to what is told him by the person sitting opposite him but also to what Jesus may want to say to that person, must first get familiar with the voice of Jesus. Being a pastor means saying what Paul said: *'I no longer live, but Christ lives in me'* (Galatians 2:20).

This also means that pastoral care is not primarily about what you say or do, but about who you are. You yourself are the most important instrument in the pastoral conversation. The way you are, your attitude in life, is what will touch people. And the first thing you will discover as you walk with God is that what matters is not how strong or brave you are, but that you 'become like a child'. In Luke 9:24, Jesus shares the most fundamental lesson we can learn in life: *'For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will save it'*. In pastoral care the deepest and final question is always: do you trust God? Do you trust in his love for you? Do you trust He will take care of you? As you counsel others in this, you will face this question yourself again and again in the secret chamber of your heart, where you meet with God. Only when you have learned to trust God and to receive His love will you be able to pass it on through pastoral care. This is why pastoral care is not so much a method or a technique as it is a way of life. It means living the life Jesus taught us to live by his example: without the Father, I can do nothing. Yet in the power of his Father he was full of compassion for the people he met and was able to draw near them to offer healing, support and guidance. As a pastor, you, too, may draw near to people in the power of Jesus in order to give them hope and new strength in his name.

The goal of pastoral care

A pastor gets right next to people in the name of Jesus with the purpose of seeking hope and renewal in their situation together. If you truly desire to offer people hope and renewal, your pastoral conversations will always be a mixture of confrontation and inspiration. Both of these poles are indispensable if you seek to bring change and renewal to people who are stuck in life.

Confrontation

Confrontation usually comes first – after you have listened carefully to the person who has come to tell you his or her story. And note that there is a difference between hearing and listening. Hearing means you allow a person to tell his story; listening means you make an effort to sense what is driving him, what he is really saying. It means listening for what lies behind the spoken words. Is he trying to vindicate himself, to excuse himself, or perhaps to blame someone else? Confrontation is all about being honest with that person. There are really very few people in our lives who are completely honest with us. Sometimes even a husband or wife does not dare to speak out about what he or she sees in a partner's life. All too often we cover each other's mistakes with the cloak of charity – with the result that evil is allowed to fester. This is why James calls on us to be honest, especially when we find one another caught up in difficulties. In writing on how to cope with illness in the church, he says, among other things, that we must confess our sins to one another before we pray for and anoint the sick (James 5:16). If we do not honestly confront the wrong in a person's life, or the false motives we may discover as he shares his story with us, our pastoral care will remain shallow and ineffective.

Confrontation means placing the other person's life in the light of God in order to see what has grown crooked or is sinful. This is the prophetic side of pastoral care. Listening prophetically means seeing what is going on deep inside the other person's heart, sensing what he thinks and feels and then putting the finger on it in the name of

Jesus. It means seeing beyond the outward appearance and the fine words and identifying what you perceive in his life. When you confront someone in this manner, it is important to realise that only a confrontation rooted in love for that person will lead him closer to God. Your motive for confronting him is that you desire to deliver him from the bonds in which he is tied up, consciously or unconsciously, you want to heal him from his bad habits, rescue him from negativity. Confrontation must always be aimed at forgiveness of sins and a restoration of the other person's relationship with God and with those around him. That is the purpose and as pastors we must never lose sight of this purpose: when we confront someone, we are inviting to confess their sin. And when that happens, we may fully proclaim forgiveness (1 John 1:9) and help the other person to step out of the darkness into the light of God's grace!

Another condition for confrontation in pastoral care is that as a pastor you must never place yourself above the other person, but rather stand beside him as one sinner next to another. A pastor is not a saint confronting a sinner, but a sinner helping another sinner to recognise his mistakes. You cannot point out a speck of sawdust in your neighbour's eye without recognising the plank in your own eye. This does not mean that as a pastor you will never be able to speak out against anyone unless until you are completely sinless yourself. It does mean that in a confronting conversation you must confess your own sins and vulnerabilities. Then you can stand at the foot of the cross together and be on the same spiritual level. With that awareness you can then lovingly and honestly point out what you see or perceive.

This prophetic listening is really a kind of double listening: while listening to what the other person is sharing with you, you are also listening for what God's Spirit is telling you, for whatever words or thoughts He may be placing in your heart as you tune in to Him and to the other person. Prophetic listening means listening to a person's story, while allowing the Holy Spirit to guide your response. It requires that you have become familiar with listening to God's voice through a life of prayer and meditation on God's Word. If this is

the case, you will receive the right words to speak in the pastoral conversations you engage in.

Inspiration

The other side of the pastoral conversation is inspiration. Inspiration is all about bringing people back to God's purpose for their lives. It is like opening the curtains and windows in a stuffy, dark and cramped room. People who are suffering can get so caught up in their suffering that there is no room left in their world for anything other than pain, sorrow or shame. Exposing these things to God's forgiveness and healing enables us to find new space for lifting up our head and looking up again. It enables us to breathe and to look beyond our sorrows and questions in the light of God.

Inspiration means reminding the other person who he is in God's eyes and showing him his life amounts to much more than his current situation. Inspiring a person means helping him to look at his cares through God's eyes and bringing him back to life's essence: do not let your worries rule over you, for you know your heavenly Father knows what you need (Matthew 6:31-32). Jesus ends this encouragement with these words: *'...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well'* (Matthew 6:33). Inspiration is all about joining hands in searching for signs of God's kingdom in the present situation and discovering that He is always in control. It gives us hope and new strength.

Signs of God's kingdom

In pastoral care, these signs of God's kingdom usually become visible in any of the following five ways, or in a combination thereof: comfort, healing, deliverance, reconciliation and hope.

Comfort

The first thing to do when you comfort a person is not to rebut their sorrow or despair, but to acknowledge it. Giving comfort means giving a people space to mourn their losses. By acknowledging their sadness we create space for them to truly face it. Unconsciously, most people sense they cannot get around their problems, but they

often try – and are encouraged to do so by their surroundings. A pastor's task is to provide the space a person needs to sound out the depth of his or her sorrow or loss. You can do this, because you know God is there and therefore your counselee will not be lost in a bottomless pit. You can identify the sorrow and give space to it, precisely because you know Jesus is present in it. The cross of Jesus demonstrated that no misery or sorrow is too great for him. He entered into the world's misery and carried it. This is the unique thing about pastoral care: a lot of people will try to invalidate a person's sorrow, either by downplaying it, by offering rational explanations or by holding out promises of a better future. 'Things will be fine', 'You'll find another partner', 'You're still young', and so on. Offering this kind of response means you are not taking the other person's sorrow seriously. So make sure that before you do anything else you allow space for sorrow!

Part of facing sorrows or losses is to give them a name. Mention the name of the person who has died, put your finger on the conflict causing so much anger, name the fear, the anxiety or whatever else it is that is weighing down your counselee. Many people do not dare to do this themselves and in many cases their surroundings prefer to avoid it as well, as it makes the person suffering so vulnerable. But the Bible teaches us we must do it nonetheless. After sharing some of his personal sufferings, Paul says: *'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong'* (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

To comfort a person is to help him to persevere, to be patient, to keep on living, even when his feelings suggest all has come to nothing. Comforting a person means coming alongside him and encouraging him to keep walking; drawing near him in his suffering and acknowledging it together –not so that he will wallow in it, but, having faced it, will get back up and begin to move on. This is a demanding task for you as a pastor: sharing in the sufferings of different members of your congregation will not leave you

untouched. You will taste their sorrow, allowing it to enter into your own heart. It is the only way you can draw near to them. Often, in fact, it is all you can do.

Being a comfort means becoming like the friends of Job who sat with him in his mourning and stayed there (Job 2:11-13). You keep coming back, you keep listening, you stick around quietly knowing that words will not do. You stay near in the name of Jesus. It is worth noting that the comforting effect of the presence of Job's friends disappears the moment they open their mouths and start groping for explanations for his loss. This is a trap every pastor may easily fall into: the tendency to try and explain a person's loss, to find reasons for it. We tend to do this too often and thoughtlessly, making superficial statements and presenting general truths that discredit both our counselee and God. Rather than trying to explain suffering that cannot be explained, we should call out to God together from the depth of this suffering. James says: *'Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray'* (James 5:13). Psalm 130 is a beautiful example of such a prayer: *'Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy'*.

Healing

In addition to giving comfort, pastoral care often also involves healing. Many church members carry external or internal wounds and as a pastor you have the privilege of drawing near to them on behalf of Jesus the healer and offering healing. Jesus clearly states that he came to earth to establish the kingdom of God, that is to say, to restore humanity and creation to God's rule. He did this in three ways: he proclaimed the gospel, healed the sick and delivered those in bondage. Later, when Jesus commissioned the disciples he gave them the same assignment: *'When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick'* (Luke 9:1-2). The twelve disciples were not the only ones either – another group of 72 followers of Jesus received the same commission and the same authority. They even cast out demons (Luke 10:17). In the Book of Acts, too, we see the

apostles and Paul performing many miraculous healings. Healing must have its rightful place in the church of Christ and therefore also in pastoral care.

The New Testament speaks of the gift of healing in the church of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:9). Evidently, some believers are given special grace to pray for the sick, to lay hands on them and to witness God healing the sick. But the ministry of healing is an assignment for the whole church. This is why James offers instructions on dealing with the sick that do not just apply to those who have the gift of healing, but to the entire body of believers.

At the end of his epistle, James clearly outlines how we are to deal with the sick in the church of Christ. *'Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed'* (James 5:14-16).

Several things stand out in James' comments. First, we notice the use of oil to anoint the sick. In both the Old and the New Testaments the anointing a person with oil symbolises a Consecration of that person to God. When the elders of a church anoint a sick person, that are visually and physically demonstrating that he or she is being entrusted into God's hands and given over to his care. The person's life belongs to God and therefore his or her healing can only be God's work.

James emphasises another aspect of prayer for healing by connecting sickness with sin. With healing comes forgiveness, too, he tells us. There are many instances in the Bible in which sickness comes as a consequence of sin. In 1 Corinthians 11:30 a large number of church members are said to be ill, some even fatally, as a result of celebrating communion in an unworthy manner. Jesus, when He was healing people, often said: *'Your sins are forgiven, take*

up your bed and walk'. When a person comes to God, he experiences not just physical healing, but complete restoration from brokenness and sin. The divine healer does not deliver half measures! However, we cannot state that every disease is the result of a sin committed by the patient. If that were the case, we would all be permanently ill. When the disciples, on encountering a man blind from birth, asked whether he had sinned or his parents, Jesus replied: 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned' (John 9:2-3). Job's deep suffering is not connected to any sins he may have committed either. When his friends suggest otherwise, he has the courage to say he is innocent, calling on God as his witness. James does not say that sickness is always directly related to sin. What he says, literally, is this: '*If they have sinned...*' (James 5:15). He seems to be referring here to specific sins from the past whose consequences are still felt. These consequences, James says, will disappear after prayer and anointing.

Does this mean that every sick person prayed over and anointed by the elders of the church will immediately be healed? In many cases that is what will happen, sometimes immediately, sometimes after a longer time – but always as a recognisable answer to prayer. However, we know that not every sick person receiving prayer and anointing is healed. The Bible gives us numerous examples of this, such as Paul, who suffered from a thorn in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Sometimes God's purpose is to teach us things through suffering that we cannot learn in any other way. Our only option in such cases is to trust '*that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*' (Romans 8:28). If we live in this awareness, all of our prayers, including those for healing, will be in line with the prayer Jesus uttered in Gethsemane: '*Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will*' (Mark 14:36). This prayer reveals a deep intimacy with the heavenly Father. In the very depths of suffering, Jesus calls his Father 'Abba', or 'Papa'. And He confesses that this Papa is the Mighty God who can end the present suffering

or heal any sickness with these words: *'Everything is possible for you'*. No problem is too great for God, no sickness is too severe, no suffering is heavy that He cannot lift it. This is why Jesus pleads: *'Take this cup from me'*. Let it end, make the pain, the sorrow and the suffering go away. It is a cry from the depths of the heart! And yet it is followed by a total surrender to God: *'Yet not what I will, but what you will'*. Even in the deepest suffering, we may entrust ourselves completely to God who loves us and is with us. This prayer Jesus uttered in His fear and despair teaches us how we may pray with the sick and the suffering.

Deliverance

In addition to comfort and prayer for healing, pastoral care involves a third element: deliverance from demons. During His time on earth, Jesus delivered many people from the power of demons who had taken possession of their lives. For example, think of the crippled woman (Luke 13:10-13), the mute man (Matthew 9:32), the demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes, from whom Jesus cast out a 'legion' of demons (Luke 8:30), or the boy suffering from seizures (Matthew 17:14-18). Many of these demon-possessed people were ill. This does not mean that every sick person is possessed by demons, but some physical and mental symptoms may point in that direction. In this area it is important to *'distinguish between spirits'* (1 Corinthians 12:10). Well-known symptoms that may suggest demon possession include compulsive or obsessive thought patterns, distorted facial expressions or changes of voice. These symptoms often go hand in hand with an intense hatred of Jesus, the Bible and prayer. Hatred of Christians in general can also be a sign of possession. Again, let me stress that not every person showing these kinds of behaviour is possessed – but such behaviour can be a sign we must take seriously.

The New Testament points out three areas in which demons can be active. They can manifest themselves in the areas of impurity (Luke 4:33), occultism (Acts 16:16) and false teachings about God and the faith (1 Timothy 4:1). Sins in these areas make people vulnerable and expose them to demonic influence. Experience also

shows us that curses and ancestral sins can also play a major role in causing bondage.

Jesus clearly taught his disciples that demons can only be cast out through concentrated prayer for deliverance. In Mark 9:29, after they have unsuccessfully tried to cast out demons, Jesus says to them: *'This kind can come out only by prayer'*. This prayer, in the Bible, is always very simple. Jesus prayed for deliverance in this way in Mark 9:25: *'You deaf and mute spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again'*. In Acts 16:18, Paul used these words: *'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!'* Praying for deliverance, then, means praying in the name of Jesus and commanding the evil spirit to depart and not to return to this person.

It is important to realise that this battle of prayer against the devil and his demons always impacts the person praying, too. This is why it is highly advisable to avoid praying for deliverance on your own, but rather to operate as a team – preferably a team that includes both men and women. That way you can complement each other. The men can pray with a man, the women with a woman. It is also important to properly prepare the person you will be praying with. He or she must know what is going to happen. Both the person being prayed for and the persons praying will know whether the demon has departed after the prayer or not. They will experience an inner lightness and space, along with an absolute assurance that the evil spirit is gone. By no means does this always occur after a single prayer; in some cases, it takes many years of prayer. Why some people are delivered in one go and others only after a long and intense struggle, we do not know. What we do know is that we may always place our complete trust in God.

Reconciliation

In addition to offering comfort, healing and deliverance, pastors have another task. In 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, Paul refers to this fourth task as follows: *'And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though*

God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God'. This ministry of reconciliation is performed through preaching, when the message of reconciliation and forgiveness is proclaimed, but also through pastoral care, when we share it with people on a personal basis.

In the context of pastoral care, reconciliation, first and foremost, takes place between God and the person to which you are ministering as a pastor. It is a restoration of a broken relationship. Every human being suffers from a breach in his or her relationship with God as a result of sin. Reconciliation with God, therefore, involves the confession of guilt and the receiving of forgiveness: your sins are forgiven you. It is important that the things that have happened in people's lives are brought into the pastoral conversation and into the light of God. This means there must be room for you as a pastor to ask people about their walk with God. Which place does God have in their lives, does he have the first place, do we love him above all and everyone else? These questions are a vital part of caring for one another. If as a pastor you desire to take God and your church members seriously, you will bring up the topic of their relationship with God.

While the ministry of reconciliation deals with reconciling people to God, it also deals with reconciliation between people. The church of Christ, like any other place in which people live together, can be the scene of quarrels and discord. The unity Jesus prayed for so passionately in John 17 is sometimes hard to find. Most quarrels involve two or several individuals, but in some cases entire churches can get entangled with each other, along with their pastors. These situations go against everything Jesus taught us and they are a terrible testimony to the world around us.

Unity should be the number one characteristic of the church of Christ. Jesus says so in John 13, John 15, John 17 and many other passages. The commandment to love one another is the fulfilment of all other commandments (Romans 13:8,10). God holds it against his children and the church when we fail to live by this love. In the

Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says the following about disputes among his followers: *'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift'* (Matthew 5:23-24). In other words, there is no point in praying to God if you are in the middle of a fight with your brother or sister, because God will not listen to you until you have made up. And if things go wrong again, you have to go back and fix them again. *'How often?'* Peter once asked Jesus. His reply, *'Not seven times, but seventy-seven times'*, means: again and again and again.

Getting reconciled with a brother or sister requires the same step as reconciliation with God: you need to return to your brother or sister. This is the most difficult in situations in which you are convinced you are right and he or she is wrong. But then, too, you are called to return to that person and to ask him or her to forgive you, recognising that things are not right between you. In John 13, Jesus calls us as his disciples to be the least among our brothers and sisters, to wash one another's feet. Unity is more important than establishing who is right!

What really helps in all of this is to remind ourselves and one another of what Jesus went through to reconcile us with God. He let go of his glory and majesty and became human like us in order to bring us back to God. He took all our guilt upon himself to save us. Considering that, could it be too much for him to ask us to take each other's guilt upon ourselves? As a pastor, you have the privilege of being the first to put the ministry of reconciliation into practice. It is unacceptable for pastors and churches to be at odds with each other, to malign each other or to openly engage in quarrels or disputes. A church or pastor that does, loses all credibility in proclaiming reconciliation, forgiveness and grace. Jesus speaks about this in the parable of the man who owed the king a large debt and then had his debt cancelled by the king. The very same day, the man ran into someone who owed him a small amount of money and had him thrown into jail for failing to pay. When the king heard about

this, he was furious and the man was punished severely. This is what will happen to pastors and churches who themselves are reconciled by God but then fail to practice the ministry of reconciliation in their dealings with others. As a pastor, you have to set the example in this, helping others to follow.

Hope

Whenever we offer comfort, healing, deliverance and reconciliation, we do not just empathise with people in their sorrow, need or guilt, but we may also show them how to move forward. Sorrow is not easily overcome, sickness does not always pass, deliverance from bondage does not always free a person of every fear or anxiety and full reconciliation often involves a long and difficult path. Your job as a pastor is to offer hope to people in the very midst of all these situations. Often they will have lost all hope and they will have given up believing anything will ever change. Your job is to come alongside these people, not to join them in feeling low, but to show them that there is hope, even in their circumstances. Suffering is not easy for anybody, but as Christians we know that God can use it to help us grow, to make us stronger and to teach us life's most vital lessons.

In Romans 5:3-4, Paul puts it this way: *'we (...) glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope'*. Through his own sufferings, Paul discovered that what matters is that we persevere, that is, that we keep going even under intense pressure. To better understand perseverance, think, for instance, of the pillars that uphold a heavy bridge. Perseverance is not just sitting around waiting for things to pass by, but rather it is eagerly longing to find out what God wants you to discover through your suffering. Remember that His promise to everyone who believes is that all things – including your difficult situation – will work together for good (Romans 8:28).

This is the encouragement you can offer to people who have given up hoping: 'Hang in there, God will carry you through this and you will emerge stronger than ever before'. That is the kind of character

Paul is talking about in Romans 5. Character, here, means you have been tested, you are experienced and because of your experience you have become better at coping with the trials and tribulations that come your way. This discovery gives you renewed hope and perspective. You can face your sufferings, you find courage to look beyond your present difficulties. Ultimately, hope does not mean you believe everything is going to be fine; rather, it means you are certain that God is with you, that he will not let go of you and that he will carry you. He gives each of us the strength we need to carry our cross. Hope is also an awareness that suffering will not have the final say in our lives, but that Jesus will. Paul stresses this point in 2 Corinthians 4:17: *'For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all'*.

It is important that you teach people to hope, that you teach them that God is there and that their suffering is not a bottomless pit, because their lives are in His hands. You will find that some people will recognise this, while others will not. Some will find an anchor in their troubles, others will seem to drown in them. This does not happen by chance; ultimately, it is a choice. As a pastor you have the privilege and the possibility to teach people that their response after the initial shock of sorrow, sickness or disappointment depends on the choices they make. In almost any situation we encounter as human beings, we have two options: we can get carried away by our sufferings, or we can deliberately and hopefully endure them. In order to choose the latter, your church members need to be instructed and encouraged.

The two most important tools for remaining hopeful and even growing stronger in suffering are prayer and forgiveness. Prayer keeps us connected to God, even when we do not understand him, or when we disagree with how he is leading our lives. Think of Job who in his deepest despair kept calling out to God. Or think of Jesus who in Gethsemane returned no less than three times to beg his Father for deliverance and at the same time to surrender to his will. In addition to prayer, forgiveness is also crucial if we want to avoid drowning in the sufferings caused us by other people. Forgiveness

will not protect us from physical harm, but it will protect our soul as it will lift us out of the reach of anger and resentment, preventing those enemies from entering our being. Forgiveness makes us stronger than the evil directed at us. This is what Paul meant when he wrote these words: *'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. (...) Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good'* (Romans 12:14,21). It is also what Jesus meant when he said: *'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven'* (Matthew 5:44-45).

These things will not just happen in a person's life; they are the result of deliberate decisions made under the guidance of the Spirit of God and with the support of a pastor. These decisions enable a person to persevere and to keep the flame of hope burning. They enable us to emerge from suffering stronger than we were before and because of them we need not suffer in vain.

Chapter 4

The role of the church in pastoral care

In many churches the pastor, or spiritual leader, is the main person providing pastoral care. He is either approached by church members seeking counsel or goes out himself to visit, talk and pray with members of the congregation. Pastoral care is a major part of a pastor's job and takes up most of his time. In my experience, many church members will not feel they or their problems have been taken seriously until the pastor of the church has come to visit. Others may come, such as elders, deacons or fellow church members, but ultimately the person they want to see is the pastor.

It was the same in the early church. In Acts 6, we read that as the body of believers grew, providing pastoral care began to take up more and more of the apostles' time. The Hellenistic believers felt they were being overlooked and brought their complaint to the apostles. These gathered all the believers together, explaining that their main task as apostles was not to provide pastoral care and practical support, but to pray and to preach. They suggested the church choose seven deacons to serve the church during the communal meals and in other areas (Acts 6:1-7). Interestingly, this proposal was perfectly in line with the advice Jethro gave Moses long before (Exodus 18:21, 22). The gist of it was that providing pastoral care should be made the responsibility of a wider group of people in the church and not be left exclusively to the apostles. So we see that in the church of Christ there are different ministries that are involved in caring for its members. In the early days, the apostles and deacons took the lead. Later on Paul distinguished several other ministries and eventually all of the believers were called on to take care of one another, to bear one another's burdens, to look after each other. The church of Christ is a pastoral community!

Looking after each other involves inspiration, encouragement, comfort. These, too, are the responsibility of every believer. Throughout the New Testament we come across instructions such as these: encourage each other (Romans 1:12), have concern for each

other (1 Corinthians 12:25), serve one another (Galatians 5:13), offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9) and carry each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2). This means specifically that when someone is suffering, the rest of us in the church suffer with him, or when someone has reason to rejoice, the rest of rejoice with him (1 Corinthians 12:26).

In this way, the body of Christ forms a pastoral community in which not only the pastor offers counsel, admonition or comfort, but in which every member plays his or her part. The unity Jesus so often speaks about finds expression primarily in our care for one another in good times and bad times. It manifests itself on our conversations and the attention we give each other as well as the practical support we extend to one another. Looking after each other does not just mean talking and praying together, it also, emphatically, means sharing. So if one of us is lacking in something, including finances, the church lends a hand. This is how God's great commandment that we love our neighbour as ourselves becomes a reality in the church!

Personal problems

The range of problems you can run into in providing pastoral care to individual church members is so wide, it would be impossible to cover them all in this part of the Pastors' Manual. Besides, as a pastor you don't have an answer to every question anyway. Your job is to listen and to respond in the name of Jesus, to suffer with your church members, stand beside them and pray with them, thus giving them a glimpse of God's nearness in their suffering or trials. Having said that, however, we must also realise that the Bible offers many surprising answers to life's toughest questions and cares.

Many of the problems with which people will come to you can be clustered in certain categories. We've already looked at sorrow, sickness, guilt and bondage. In this chapter on personal problems, we will focus mainly on problems that come from within and that are tied up with psychological issues, such as depression and anxiety, self-esteem, loneliness, addiction and spiritual problems.

Depression

Many people suffer from negative thoughts and feelings for longer or shorter periods. These dark periods are sometimes related to disappointment in oneself or in others, causing a person to get stuck in a downward spiral. The majority of people manage to get these thoughts or feelings under control, get back on their feet and start again with a positive attitude. But there is also a large group of people who fail in this; they sink deeper and deeper into negativity, until they can no longer get back out on their own strength. They are experiencing a depression and they need good support. You can recognise a depressed person primarily by his gloomy feelings; to the victim of depression, it is as if everything is covered by a blanket of grey.

Depressed people are negative about themselves, they are ashamed of themselves. They are pessimistic, they don't think anything will work, they have no hope or expectation. Their minds are constant

flurry of negative thoughts. They don't get much done, everything seems too much or too difficult for them, even the smallest tasks look mountainous to them. They are often too tired to get out of bed and nothing – not even their loved ones - interests them anymore. That's what a depression is like. Sometimes, a depression can have a physical cause, for instance in the case of post-natal depression. Sometimes it is the result of many years of repressed emotions, such as anger or sorrow, or of some crushing experience through which a person has lost him or herself. Depression is also often related to a psychological vulnerability passed on from parents to children, sometimes for many generations.

Many people, especially Christians, feel guilty about having a depression. If you have become negative about yourself and your surroundings, it can be almost impossible to relate to God and faith positively. It is important that as a pastor you point out to people that being depressed is not necessarily a sin – it is a form of sickness that cannot always be helped. In fact, depression is a serious illness that paralyses your mind and your heart. In the Bible we meet numerous depressed people: Job, Jonah, Jeremiah and the author of Psalm 43: *'Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God'* (verse 5).

This is why it is so important that in counselling a depressed person, you do not issue all kinds of orders and push them to have more faith in God and to try harder to believe. Even more importantly, you must avoid deliberate or unconscious accusations regarding weak faith or a lack of trust. Your depressed brother or sister simply cannot cope for the moment. You wouldn't tell a person with a broken leg to go and practice jumping over a fence, would you? Neither should you tell a person with a broken spirit to trust harder. What you can tell him is that God will not let go and that even if he feels as though God has abandoned him, He is there and loves them deeply. Keep repeating this time and time again. Regardless of what is happening – or not happening – in the depressed person's life, the good Shepherd will never forsake him. If he cannot believe, the fellowship

must do it for him. If she can no longer pray, you and other believers can pray for her. Stand in for the depressed person and bring him to God, like the four friends did with the paralysed man in Mark 2.

Also, it is important to help him or her take small steps towards becoming active again. Gently encourage him to look after himself, to get out of bed, to get outside. Help him, step by step, to start living again. In this way you will show him there is hope, there is a life for him to pursue.

Fear

One of the root causes of depression and other psychological disorders is fear. People go through a lot of things that can make them afraid and it is important that as pastors we teach them how to cope with fear and what the Bible says about it. Fear has to do with losing control. A situation gets out of hand, you don't know where things are going and this causes physical and emotional tension. You're constantly on the alert, danger lurks everywhere and the fear of it takes a hold of you. In itself, fear is a healthy response to danger, but if it starts dominating your life it has become a psychological problem. Fear, then, is related to a conscious or unconscious feeling of being under threat. It occurs a lot in countries plagued by war, persecution and danger. The constant tension of not knowing where the next threat will come from, that feeling of having to look over your shoulder all the time can cause a person to live in permanent fear. And this has a huge spiritual and physical impact; it paralyses and exhausts you. In practice, there are three ways to respond to fear: flee, fight or freeze. Which of these a person chooses depends on character, choices made before and mental strength.

Fear has to do with worry. A person can be overwhelmed by the cares, uncertainties and feeling of being out of control. Jesus addresses this issue in Matthew 6:25-34 when talking about fears regarding the future. Will we have enough food, clothing, will our needs be met? Jesus shows us how best to cope with worries that can seem to consume us. As a pastor, you can pass on this lesson to fearful people you encounter. Jesus says this: *'Do not worry about your life'* (Matthew 6:25). The words He uses here mean: do not let

worrying take over. It is not wrong to have concerns, to think about situations, to be apprehensive or even afraid of certain things. But Jesus says: do not let these feelings take over. Do not let your worries grow so big that there is room for nothing else in your mind. It is a fact that life is full of uncertainties, we never know what tomorrow will bring, but that does not mean we must be afraid. Jesus stresses that we do not have to give in to worries or fear, because the Father will take care of us. Just as He takes care of the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. So the answer to fearing the uncertainties of life is to keep remembering that our heavenly Father knows what we need right where we are, and that He will provide. *Do not focus on what you cannot control, instead focus on who God is to you and all these things will be given to you as well*' (Matthew 6:33).

Self-esteem

The Bible frequently points out that God deals with all people equally and without favouritism. In God's eyes all men are of equal value, of equal importance, equally loved. This is why Jesus declares in John 3:16: *'For God so loved the world...'* This also implies that God loves all people. To Him each one of us is so precious that He gave His only Son for us, so that we might be saved. If you consider this, there can be no grounds for people to compare themselves with others. Yet it happens all the time. All too often our self-esteem is directly linked to the people with whom we compare ourselves. If we look up to others, we may easily look down upon ourselves. It is a natural human tendency to want to be better and more than those around us. A person who feels he falls short may easily develop an inferiority complex.

So one of the causes of inferiority complexes and low self-esteem is the comparing of ourselves with others – and underlying that is our desire to be more or better. In Philippians 2:3, Pauls says: *'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves'*. This attitude will help us to avoid comparing and longing to be bigger and better, and instead to rejoice in who others are, while also appreciating our own position as the place in which God has called us to live with and serve him.

Self-denial is the opposite of self-importance. But self-denial does not mean you have low self-esteem or think negatively about yourself. The Bible testifies to the unique beauty of each individual person, created in God's image (Genesis 2), '*a little lower than the angels*' (Psalm 8:5). In the summary of the Ten Commandments we are instructed to love God above all else and our neighbour *as ourselves*. There is a healthy self-assurance, in which we accept how we were made and what gifts we were endowed with and in which we manage our personal ambitions in a healthy way. As Christians, certainly we may seek to bring out the best in ourselves in order to honour God. The secret is to base our self-esteem on how God made us and not on a comparison with other people.

Not that low self-esteem always results from comparing. Sometimes parents foster a poor self-image in their children by emphasising their limitations and failures. Sometimes bad preaching leads people to believe they are bad and sinful through and through and will never get any better either. Being disappointed in ourselves when we had expected more can also give our self-esteem a knock. All of these thoughts and experiences can eventually create a lasting sense of worthlessness or even self-abhorrence. In pastoral care you will often encounter people struggling with their self-esteem. You can help them, on the one hand, by affirming their beauty, uniqueness and worth. Affirm them in their identity as a man or woman, in their role as a husband or wife, father or mother, brother or sister in the fellowship. On the other hand, you can use the Bible to show them how precious they are to God, teaching them to look at themselves through God's eyes. This will help them renew their thinking about themselves and their surroundings. If there is one place where any single person's real value is visible, it is on the cross of Jesus. He gave Himself for each of us. We are so deeply precious to Him that He was prepared to give up everything to reconnect with us!

Loneliness

As a pastor you will often encounter people who feel lonely. Loneliness is that painful inner emptiness we all feel from time to time – that feeling that ultimately you are on your own and that no

one really knows or understands you. It is a realisation that there is nobody with whom you are deeply connected. Loneliness is the absence of a soulmate. Loneliness usually has little to do with being alone. The most intense loneliness is often felt in crowds, or even in marriage. It is often a passing feeling, as sooner or later we meet people we can connect with from heart to heart. But sometimes loneliness stays, leaving a person feeling incapable of developing intimate relationships.

Chronic loneliness can have many causes. One common social cause is the distraction provided by television and mobile phones that leaves people with less and less time for quiet conversation and just being together. In cities, people tend to live more anonymously than in rural areas. How a person is raised and reaches adulthood can also influence his or her susceptibility to loneliness. If you were not loved in a healthy way during childhood, or never learned to give, or were never accepted just as you were, your ability to connect with others later in life may suffer. Loneliness can also be a form of escape, of withdrawing from the difficulties of having to be open and vulnerable in friendships or relationships.

As a pastor, you should realise that loneliness is a very common problem, even if it is not often mentioned. The fear of loneliness is one of man's greatest fears and its roots go back to Paradise, when God saw that Adam had no mate. *'It is not good for the man to be alone'*, God said (Genesis 2:18) and He created Eve to be *'a helper suitable for him'*. Then Adam had someone like himself, yet different, with whom he could share everything. Friendships and relationships are vital to us as human beings and as a pastor you must recognize this and have the courage to put the finger on the sore spot if you see one of your church members suffering from loneliness. Pinpoint the problem, search together for possible reasons why there is no *soul mate*, emphasising that being alone is not necessarily the same as being lonely: a person can enjoy being alone in a good way, provided he or she also has regular heart-to-heart contact with others. The church can play a vital role in this area. Praying, singing and reading the Bible together is in itself a way of sharing our deeper thoughts. It

creates a bond and lays a solid foundation for further conversation and friendship. The church should be a place where people living alone are not lonely. But it requires that we are aware of the issue of loneliness. As a pastor you can play an important role in this.

Addiction

Addictions are another category of problems that can cause intense suffering. Alcohol and drug addiction usually come to mind first, but there are many other, often less visible, forms. Addiction means showing certain behaviour or habits that you can no longer control: you *have to* do this or that, no matter what. Addiction often begins in small ways, but then rapidly goes from bad to worse until the thing you are addicted to is out of your control – or rather, until it takes control of you. In addition to alcohol or drugs, people can be addicted to work, television, the Internet, sex or pornography, food, sports, smoking.

The Bible addresses the problem of addiction. In 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul says: *"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but I will not be mastered by anything*'. Anyone who believes in and belongs to Jesus has been delivered from every form of slavery. Sin no longer has dominion over us; we can resist and overcome sinful impulses and desires. In Romans 6:11-12, Paul writes: *'In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires'*. In the power of the resurrected Jesus we can battle and overcome sinful desires and addictions. This is the spiritual basis for the battle against addiction. Our goal is to keep our lives and bodies pure, as the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

With this in mind, you will do all you can as a pastor to help people shake off their addictions, whatever they may be. Here are a few general guidelines for helping people struggling with addiction:

- 1) Help them to acknowledge their addiction and their need for help.
- 2) Make sure the addict tells the people around him personally and that they are willing to offer support. Get them to rid the home of

alcohol or other substances. Get them to guard the television or the Internet and to watch over the addict both lovingly and strictly.

3) Put into practice the Biblical principle that says, 'Overcome evil with good' by encouraging the addict to find positive and challenging activities to engage in that will help him or her to persevere.

4) Again and again, take the situation to God in prayer together, praying that the Holy Spirit will guide the addict and those around him and provide strength to persevere.

Spiritual problems

Spiritual problems are the one area with which many pastors feel most comfortable. When people get caught up in any of the problems we looked at earlier, their spiritual life is invariably affected. Body, soul and spirit are a unity and each influences the other in profound ways. But even people who are not facing personal problems such as those above, they can experience intense spiritual struggles. Every believer has his desert periods: periods of spiritual drought in which God seems distant, periods of doubt, in which you ask yourself whether what you believe really is true, or whether you really are God's child, or whether He really does love you.

People can get into spiritual trouble in a lot of ways. Many believers face the additional challenge of living among people who do not believe, or hold different beliefs. A Christian surrounded by Muslims or Buddhists has to have a solid foundation, as his beliefs are constantly being negated or attacked. But a Christian in a secularised welfare state may also have to work hard to keep the faith in the face of the many forces tempting him away from God. Spiritual dryness can also be the result of a lack of knowledge of the Scriptures and of the Christian faith. The many questions without answers can overwhelm you, causing you to doubt. Others get into trouble as a result of being undisciplined: they spend less and less time reading and praying until eventually there is nothing left but a meaningless habit. It should not surprise us that in John 15 Jesus points out that what really matters is that we '*remain in Him*' and that the way to do this is to remain in his Word.

When someone asks you to help them deal with a spiritual problem, you must realise that he or she sees you as an example. People see you as a representative of God, as someone who knows how things work, someone who is steadfast in the faith. Especially when dealing with people struggling with doubt, it can be helpful to be honest about your own doubts and struggles in your walk with God. This will help them see that their struggles are not out of the ordinary and that you have found a way to cope with similar struggles in a positive way.

Another important thing in talking about a spiritual problem is to rule out any specific causes that may lie at its root. Are there sins that stand between God and this person and that need confessing and overcoming? If such causes are absent, it is always good to ask this question: what might God want to teach you in this period of spiritual difficulty? Is a test of your faith? Hebrews 12 speaks about people going through great difficulties in their spiritual lives and their battle against sin. The chapter is one big call to perseverance. Don't give up, hold on to your faith, to what the Bible says and to what you have learned about God.

As a pastor – especially in dealing with spiritual problems – you must encourage people to keep reading their Bibles and praying, even if it feels pointless. Psalm 27 says: *'A day will come when I will once again see God!'* In Hebrews 12:7 we are offered this encouragement: *'Endure hardship, you are in God's school learning vital lessons through your current circumstances.'* It is a tough school, but one in which you will learn to keep seeking God, no matter how long it takes. As a pastor, it is your job to help groping believers find Scriptural meaning in their spiritual desert. You can explain what is happening to them and why. By offering teaching on spiritual desert periods, for instance on the basis of the desert experiences of Israel, you will give them a new perspective on their questions and trials and help them to persevere. In every desert, there are both Mara and Elim experiences (Exodus 15:22-27). Your most important tool in all of this, as a pastor, is prayer. Spiritual problems call for spiritual support. Taking time to take a person's despair to God together is a more wholesome remedy than any other!

Relational problems

In addition the personal problems you may encounter among your church members as a pastor, you will also regularly have to deal with relational issues. Examples include being single, preparing for marriage, marital problems and divorce. We will look briefly at each of these issues in this chapter.

Being single

Adam started out as a single, but God soon observed that living alone was not ideal for the man he had created: *'The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18)*. Then God created a wife for Adam, named Eve. Most singles feel and struggle with the absence of a partner in their lives. At the same, we must realise that not everyone longs to be married or to have a life partner. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul states that both marriage and singleness are a gift from God. In verses 8 and 9, he says: *'Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion'*.

In the same chapter, Paul, who was single himself, contends for the value of being unmarried. Singleness, he says, is not a pitiful state, but offers tremendous opportunities. Paul even says that if you are not yet bound in marriage, you should not actively seek to become so, because once you are married, you will be unable to devote your undivided attention to the kingdom of God. *'An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord.' " But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— and his interests are divided'* (1 Corinthians 7: 32-33). The same applies to women. Paul's conclusion at the end of this chapter (verse 38), therefore, is as follows: *'So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better'*. And in the final verse (verse 40), he says something similar about widows: *'In my judgment, she is*

happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God'.

All in all, Paul places singleness in an entirely different light than that in which our society usually sees it. Whereas in our society a single person is seen as someone who has 'missed the boat', in God's kingdom being unmarried means you are able to devote yourself more fully to God and his service. Remember, though, that this deliberate singleness is a gift that is not given to every unmarried person. It is good to take seriously the possibility that people may deliberately choose to remain single in order to devote themselves to God and those around them. Some people make this choice long before ever having had a relationship. Others come to the realisation later, deciding, for instance, not to remarry following a divorce or following the death of their partner. People making this decision must realise they are also choosing for sexual abstinence. It is not without reason that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 that those who feel they may not be able to control themselves sexually are better off getting married.

As a pastor, it is important for you to be aware of the fact that most singles have not chosen to remain unmarried and therefore struggle with their situation. This struggle often involves a deep sense of loneliness. The basic human need for friendship, for heart-to-heart sharing, is as important for them as it is for married couples, but far less readily obtainable. Married people are expected to share that kind of bond, while singles often have to invest far more deliberately.

Another danger to which singles are exposed is that of low self-esteem. A single may easily think no one likes him or her, that there is no other person in the world they can really connect with. 'What is wrong with me? Why do I not have a partner, or did my marriage fail?' And trying to connect with the many couples surrounding him can give a single the feeling he is being pushy.

A third challenge faced by singles is that of sexuality. Just like everyone else, single people have sexual desires and feelings. Being

unable to have these fulfilled by a partner, they may do it themselves. There is nothing wrong or essentially sinful with masturbation, as long as the person engaging in it does not direct his or her fantasy at a specific person. Jesus warns about this in Matthew 5, when speaking on adultery: *'Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart'* (Matthew 5:28). Masturbation exposes a person to the risk of this form of adultery. It also exposes a person to the risk of addiction: with no one there to help you manage your sexual impulses healthily, they can easily take over.

It is important, then, for pastors to be aware of the singles within their communities and to engage with them on the topic of their singleness.

The church is the family of God and should have room for everyone, leaving no one on their own. Encourage families to befriend singles, so that they will be a real part of the greater community.

Preparing for marriage

Even among Christians, many couples have marital problems. A lot of pastoral work has to do with marriage issues. As pastors, we must not just support couples who are in trouble, but also find ways of preventing marital problems. Preparing upcoming couples for marriage is an important part of that. Prevention is better than cure! The church is pastorally responsible for helping couples who wish to get married to prepare themselves in a Biblical way. By the way, the church does not carry this responsibility alone: parents also have a major role to play in this area. The example they set will be followed by their children when they get married. The way they treat each other, communicate and express love will invariably be passed on to the next generation of married couples. So marriage preparation subconsciously begins at a young age, with young folk observing the marriages of their parents.

Part of being a fellowship of believers is to help upcoming couples prepare for their marriage in a structured, deliberate way. This may involve talks with a pastor or with older couples willing to help

younger ones on their way. The Bible clearly outlines how God meant marriage to be and it is important that these principles are taught properly. It can prevent a lot of marriage troubles.

The first thing to observe in marriage preparation is that God made both man and woman according to his own likeness: *'So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'* (Genesis 1:27). Masculinity and femininity both come from God and are of equal value to him. While men and women are dissimilar, they are not unequal. Especially Christians living in a culture in which women are seen and treated as inferior to men can take a clear stand in this area. A Christian husband respects his wife, because to God men and women are equal and equally precious.

Christian marriage is defined by mutual respect, as both husband and wife were created as God meant each one to be; he loves them both equally and Jesus died on the cross for both. A woman who is that precious in God's eyes must be treated as precious. The apostle Peter writes: *'Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life'* (1 Peter 3:7). This realisation will affect how a couple communicate together. It means they will take each other's thoughts and emotions seriously, show genuine interest and desire to understand each other's innermost being. Attentive listening and an honest response are among the greatest gifts a husband and wife can give one another. In your partner, God has given you the most precious thing on earth; unwrap this gift from God carefully. Realising that there is more to discover in, and to receive from, your partner will keep your conversations interesting and your relationship alive.

Respect also means that a husband will do all he can to protect his wife. Usually, the husband is the stronger of the two physically and rather than using his strength against his wife, he must use it to help and protect her. Quite specifically, this means a Christian husband will never beat his wife, even in cultures in which this is quite

accepted. If you want to convince one another in marriage, do it with words, respectfully, not with violence. Respect is the most important feature in any relationship and by showing respect in a love relationship we show respect for God, who gave us marriage.

The Bible deals extensively with marriage. Both Paul and Peter write about this topic, emphasising that Christians are different from those around them in how they treat each other as couples. In Ephesians 5:21-33, Paul speaks of how a husband and wife are to respect one another, each accepting the other's authority. He says that we must do this '*out of reverence for Christ*' (Ephesians 5:21). We submit to one another because Christ wants us to; love does not seek to dominate, but to serve. Jesus demonstrated this when he washed the feet of the disciples in John 13 and on many other occasions. True love is serving and sacrificial; that is the meaning of the Biblical word 'agape'. It is this love that gives a marriage beauty and strength. And it is this love we may introduce to upcoming couples as they prepare for marriage.

In practice, this means a wife must submit to her husband as to the Lord, Paul explains. '*For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church*' (Ephesians 5:23). The message here is not that a husband is to boss his wife around, on the contrary, it is that a husband is to love his wife '*just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*' (verse 25). Being '*the head of the wife*' (verse 23) means that a husband holds final responsibility for the wellbeing of his wife and family and that when push comes to shove and decisions have to be made he is the one to do it, after having consulted with his wife. In making decisions he does not serve his own interests, but those of the family. In other words, he must ask himself what Jesus would do in his place. A wife is called upon to acknowledge her husband's authority and to grant him this role: '*Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything*' (verse 24). If as a pastor you provide teaching on these Biblical marriage rules through marriage preparation sessions, upcoming couples will have clear guidelines for developing a good relationship.

A lot of excellent marriage preparation courses have been made available by churches worldwide.

One is the **Alpha Pre-Marriage Course**; it is available in many languages. For more information, go to www.themarriagecourse.org or send an email to info@themarriagecourse.org.

Marital problems

Despite the clear marriage guidelines presented in Scripture, a lot of Christian couples run into trouble. It should not surprise us that relational problems occur in this broken world; what matters is that we handle them well. In Genesis 2:24, when God ordains marriage, we read: *'That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh'*. This verse shows us three steps necessary for entering into a good marriage. The three steps, however, also reveal the most common problem areas: the role of the family, disappointment in one another, and differing perspectives on sexuality.

Leaving one's father and mother

In many countries in the Middle East and Asia it is the custom for newlyweds to move in with the husband's parents after the wedding. The idea behind this is that the young couple will be able to provide for the parents when they grow old. This intergenerational caregiving is wonderful, but it can also cause huge tensions, especially for the daughter-in-law. Living with his parents often places the husband in a conflict of loyalties, in which he is forced to choose between his wife and his mother. It is in those moments, that a man must be aware of the necessity of 'leaving his father and mother'. Even though he may share a house with his parents and get along well with them, a married man must share his life to the full with his wife and no longer with his mother. Your wife or your husband comes first, he or she is the one you belong to now, the one you have chosen to live with. With all due respect for parents, it is important to give priority to your marriage partner and to make this evident in the choices you make, even if you live near your parents.

Being united with your partner

The second step is to become united in marriage. This means that despite differences in character and physique, husband and wife are to form a tight unit. This unit is built on mutual love and maintained through conscious, ongoing communication. In many marriages, conversations rarely go deeper than 'How was your work?', 'Are the children doing alright?' and 'What's for supper tonight?' These topics are inevitable in the daily routine, but it is bad for marriage if a couple never gets further than that. To develop a lasting union, husband and wife must regularly take time to listen, to be there for one another. In order to talk and listen to God, Jesus says we must set apart a special time and place: 'When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray' (Matthew 6:6). It is no different in marriage: we must set apart a time and a place for being together intimately and without interruption. There we will find room to really talk and share, to ask each other deeper questions, such as: What makes you happy? What are you struggling with? How do you feel we are doing as a couple? Do you enjoy our sex life, or not? It may not be the norm in your culture to have this kind of conversation, but it will help you maintain healthy marriage, or fix a damaged one. Love is an attitude and an act, you receive one another as a gift, but ongoing enjoyment of each other requires attention, time and effort.

Becoming one flesh

Differing perspectives on sexuality are one of the main causes of marital problems. Because of the fact that man and woman are different and experience their own bodies differently, what God created so beautifully is often a disappointment. A healthy sex life is not to be taken for granted in any marriage. Sex is an expression of the bond of love you share, which means good communication is a precondition for good sex. Good sex without a good bond is not possible. Neither is the opposite: a good marriage bond without sex. In marriage, the physical and the psychological cannot be separated. Sex, too, is an expression of *agape*, or serving, sacrificial love. A husband and wife having sex, therefore, do not focus primarily on gratifying their own desires, but on giving pleasure to their partner. If both partners take this attitude, they will both be fulfilled sexually.

Paul speaks about this in 1 Corinthians 7: *'The husband should fulfil his marital (sexual) duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer'* (verses 3-6). The call to be there for one another and give ourselves to one another applies the bedroom, too. It is a mutual giving, in which both partners serve one another and focus on each other's wellbeing.

Marital problems also often occur when one partner believes in God and the other does not, or in which both partners follow different religions. Paul refers to this in 1 Corinthians 7, saying that a brother or sister with an unbelieving partner must not divorce. *'For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband'* (1 Corinthians 7:14). Don't try to coerce a partner into believing, rather seek to make the unbeliever envious of your lifestyle, and inquisitive, and thus to bring him or her to Jesus.

Passing on these Biblical guidelines to people having marital troubles is one way in which, as a pastor, you can come alongside them. Note that it is important to have a trustworthy, believing woman from your congregation join you in having conversations with couples. Many pastors involve their own wife in this area of counselling, together supporting the couple who are struggling.

Divorce

Despite the Bible's clear guidelines and the pastoral care you may offer, some marriages do not hold. In such cases, divorce is 'the impossible possibility'. It was not meant that way, it is not allowed and yet sometimes there is no other way. Deuteronomy 24 speaks of a *'certificate of divorce'* (verse 1) that is needed when a man wishes to leave his wife. Jesus says: *'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning'* (Matthew 19:8). In both the Old and the New Testament, the vital principle is obvious: divorce is not an option,

you have promised to be faithful and you must keep that promise. The Bible makes just exceptions: divorce is allowed if your partner has committed adultery, or if your partner wants to leave you because you believe in Jesus and he or she does not. Regarding this latter situation, Paul says: *'If the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances'* (1 Corinthians 7:15).

It is beyond doubt that God does not want or allow divorce, but that in some cases it is inevitable nonetheless. Think of situations in which a wife is abused by her husband, or in which a husband is emotionally damaged by his wife. What began in love can turn to hatred and if the tide cannot be turned, despite our best efforts, going forward together can become impossible for a husband and wife.

As a pastor you have three focal points when dealing with marital breakdown. Your first job is to do all you can to prevent divorce, through intensive counselling sessions with both partners in which you search for possible causes. Try to find ways in which God's light can shine into this dark situation to change the partners' lives and relationship. One theme you must introduce at this stage is forgiveness. In many cases, words and actions will have done a lot of damage, and forgiveness will seem a long journey away. Yet both partners must be prepared to make that journey; if they are not, there is no point in trying to fix things. Your second focal point should be the children, if there are any. Children always pay the highest price for a divorce, losing the safe haven of home and being forced, in their perception, to choose between their father or mother – a choice no child can make. Their interests are of the utmost importance and as a pastor you must try to help the parents minimise the children's suffering as a result of a possible separation. Try to make sure the parents do all they can to provide their children with maximum stability and continuity. If the couple decide to separate after all, your third task, finally, is to encourage each partner to continue walking with God and to remain a part of the fellowship of believers, despite the failure of their marriage and the disappointment, disillusionment and shame this may involve.

The five characteristics of a trustworthy pastor

With such a wide range of life's problems calling for your attention as a pastor, you do not have to make it your top priority to become knowledgeable in each and every area. It is not your knowledge that makes you a good pastor, but your character – or, more specifically, your trustworthiness. What kind of a person are you? That is what your congregation will unconsciously sense and why church members will or will not come to you for a heart-to-heart talk or for help in times of need.

Your trustworthiness as a pastor finds expression in five distinct characteristics: you are genuine, you can keep a secret, you live by clear boundaries, you take good care of yourself and you have clear sexual boundaries.

Be yourself

A lot of pastors have a distinct position of authority in their congregation. They are important to church members and are often put on a pedestal. In response to this, many pastors start to behave differently than they did before becoming a pastor. They become more distant and condescending, as if they belong to a special class of people. They cease to be themselves and begin to act the way they think a pastor ought to act. This is not just sad, it is actually wrong. God called you as you are; he has chosen to put his treasure in 'jars of clay' (2 Corinthians 4:7). His apostles and servants are not supermen and women, but common, vulnerable people. This is why it is inappropriate for a pastor to put himself on a pedestal. *'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant'*, Jesus said in Matthew 20:26. A servant pastor is characterised by the fact that he does not pretend he is stronger than the rest, but instead is willing to face his own weaknesses. The best pastor is the one who has the courage in his sermons and conversations to testify to his own vulnerability; that is how you truly draw near to people.

Be worthy of trust

People will often share their deepest secrets with you as a pastor. They may be struggling with things no one else knows about and in a pastoral conversation it will surface and they will tell you everything. To them, this will often bring immense relief; but to you as a pastor, it means being given a huge responsibility. You have to be prepared to carry that responsibility, because if you cannot promise confidentiality, people will no longer feel free to be honest with you. Confidentiality is difficult. It goes against our nature: every one of us has a natural tendency to share with others the things that touch, disturb or excite us. In cultures in which people like to talk a lot about others, it is also goes against the grain. But as pastor you must promise your church members that you will treat whatever people share with you confidentially. Your trustworthiness represents God's trustworthiness and a breach of confidence may damage the relationship between God and the person who has come to you for help.

If you feel you really must consult with a third person about a certain problem, for example your wife or a member of the church council, then you must only do so with the express permission of the brother or sister whose problem it is.

There are exceptions to the confidentiality principle. In the case of serious suicidal tendencies, the threat of murder or sexual abuse, you may legitimately break your confidentiality promise as a pastor. In all three cases, your first priority must be to try and persuade the person in need to seek out professional support. Failing that, offer to do it for him. If he does not authorise you to do that, you must report to the legal authorities in order to protect him, or those around him, from (further) serious injuries.

Know your own boundaries

When it comes to boundaries in pastoral care, the very first boundaries to recognise are those that demarcate your own responsibilities as a pastor. Many pastors get so many calls and visits from church members that they hardly have time to attend to

sermon preparation, their own family or their personal spiritual wellbeing. That is not right. For good reason, Paul encourages Timothy with these words: *'Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock'* (Acts 20:28). This means there is a limit to the availability of the pastor. But how do we determine the limit?

One of the toughest questions you face as a pastor is: when do I step back myself and refer a person to a doctor, a psychologist or some other professional? You may need several few counselling sessions to identify the problem and to search together for the best way forward. So it is important that not to refer a person to an external specialist too quickly, without taking time to really listen and empathise. Even if you are not sure what to do, don't push the problem aside too quickly, or your counselee will feel you have not taken him or her seriously. Searching and exploring together will create a bond that will benefit you both in the process that will follow. Having said this, you also need the courage and wisdom to be clear when you have reached a point, or touched an issue, that is beyond your scope as a pastor. Then it is time to refer him or her to an external professional. A pastor is no specialist; his calling is to stand by people on behalf of God to place their situation in His light. This means that when you do refer someone, you do not let go of him, but you keep backing him as a pastor. Someone else is now going to take up the issue with him, but you will faithfully support and empathise with him in the name of Jesus! You will keep visiting, not primarily to solve problems, but to present them to God together. That is now your task as a pastor.

Your counselling sessions are another area in which you need to set limits for yourself. Ask yourself how long you allow sessions to last and how often you visit certain individuals. People love getting attention from their pastor, but the risk is that they end up relying more on him than on God. Jesus taught us an important lesson when he told his disciples: *'But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you'* (John 16:7). If Jesus said it was better for us that he went away, surely it is even more important for a

pastor step back at the right time. We must learn that we are not the ones rescuing this man or woman, but that God will carry them. We can tell them that and demonstrate it on behalf of God by listening and empathising, but having done that we must then deliberately place them back in God's hands and leave. That way there will be room for God's Spirit to move on with them. So as a pastor you have to listen and support, but then you have to let go and leave. When and how you should do that is a matter of wisdom and sensitivity. The point is that people must rely on God, not on you.

Look after yourself

One of the reasons for setting yourself boundaries is that there is a limit to what you can do. Some pastors can take on more than others, but we all have our limits. Working so hard as a pastor that you neglect yourself or your family will neither honour to God nor build up the church. On the contrary, it is a poor testimony. As if God's kingdom and his church depend on your exertion! Be aware of your boundaries, remember that a pastor needs a day of rest, too. If God himself rested after six days, surely his servants, should also. God commands us not to work for seven days at a stretch, not even in the church!

Make sure you devote enough time and attention to your wife and children: they need you. Enjoy their love. Set apart times for relaxation and physical exercise: God gave you your body, too. A pastor who has found a healthy balance between exertion and relaxation will be able to keep serving the church with renewed strength, without burning out.

Beware of sexual boundaries

If as a pastor you are intensely involved with a female church member, be sure you do not unwittingly allow the spiritual bond you share to evolve into amorousness or lust. It may happen before you know it, even if you never intended it to. This is why it is vital that you set yourself clear boundaries when it comes to interacting with members of the opposite sex. First of all, avoid being in a home or office with a member of the opposite sex while no one else is there. If

you are in a room with a woman, always keep the door open to avoid false rumours or ideas. Do not allow yourself any involvement with a female member of your congregation outside of your pastoral tasks to avoid false appearances and to protect yourself from developing inappropriate feelings. Also avoid private contact with other women on social media. Be cautious about hugging and touching, too, as these gestures can be easily misunderstood.

When counselling a member of the opposite sex, the best safety measure is to get another woman, or your own wife, to be present with you. It can make talking easier and will certainly help prevent inappropriate comments or conduct. Your wife can also offer physical comfort, such as a hug, to the female counselee. You can talk and pray with a female church member, but you shouldn't touch her, not even to comfort her. Leave that to your wife or another trustworthy woman. This will help you keep this contact pure and the boundaries clear. It will protect you and your family as well as those you counsel!

Basic pastoral skills

In order to provide effective pastoral care, every pastor should have a number of basic conversational skills. Of course, being a good pastor calls for many different skills, but these four skills are the foundation: listening actively, responding reflectively and helping assertively. These may seem obvious, but I'd like to focus on the adjectives attached to each skill: they make the difference.

Listening actively

Rule number one in pastoral care is to allow the other person to talk. You may be visiting someone, or a person may have contacted you, and after you have sat down and exchanged small talk for a few minutes, just to break the ice, you invite the other person to start sharing: 'What is it you wanted to talk to me about?' A question like that shows that you have come to listen. It means you intend to devote your full attention to the man or woman sitting across from you. Make sure you do not just focus on that person outwardly, but inwardly as well, by blocking out any distracting thoughts or feelings. Turn off your mobile phone before the meeting begins! Take plenty of time for a heart-to-heart conversation. A quick exchange will never result in a meaningful pastoral conversation. Set the time apart and be clear about this with the other person: 'We have an hour, so please take your time.'

Devoting genuine attention to a person also means that before the meeting begins you take it to God in prayer. Ask God to open your ears and heart to the person you will be seeing. Pray that you will be given the wisdom, insight and sensitivity of the Spirit to recognise what lies behind the spoken words, in the depths of this other person's heart. Praying for that person and for your conversation before it begins is the best way to prepare yourself for truly listening.

Active listening involves active watching. Often, the most telling information is communicated non-verbally. A person's body language often speaks louder than his or her words. As you develop

your observation skills, you will find a person's body, voice or eyes may tell a different story than their words. If this is the case, trust what you see: it tends to be more genuine than what you hear.

As an active listener, you do not just let the other person talk, but you ask helpful questions now and then. Sometimes you may ask for more information to clarify the situation. Sometimes your questions will be more penetrating, as you encourage your counselee to go deeper. Make sure you use open questions, that is, questions that invite your counselee to bring more of their story to light. Closed questions, by contrast, tend to put words in someone's mouth; as a pastor, you should try and avoid them. So don't ask: 'Did that make you angry?' but instead try this: 'How did that make you feel?'. An open-ended question like this will encourage the other person to share more of his or her feelings and experiences.

Responding reflectively

After the counselee has spent some time talking and you have asked a few questions, it will be your turn to respond. A pastoral response is not the same as giving your opinion on what you have heard; if you do that, the other person will stop talking. The first thing to do when you respond is to make sure you have properly understood your counselee. The way to do this is to sum up what he or she has told you *in your own words*. Using your own words is important, as it will allow the counselee to listen to his or her own story and to how it has come across.

This approach to listening and responding requires a large degree of empathy from you as a pastor. If you cannot put yourself in the other person's position, you will not be able to give words to his or her feelings and experiences. It calls for open ears and an open heart, you have to draw near to the other person in listening, while at the same time trying to imagine how you would feel in his or her position. Doing this will help you to get closer to your counselee and to respond reflectively. Here, too, of course, there are boundaries to respect: you may imagine what the other person feels like, without allowing yourself to get carried away emotionally. Your job is to

manage the conversation. In order to keep responding reflectively, you need both nearness and distance. Imagining what he or she has done, felt or experienced is not the same as endorsing it. Make sure you always allow yourself room to stand above or step outside the actual situation, otherwise you will be unable to offer real help. A pastor who only empathises cannot help his counselees move forward, which is the whole point: people come to you for empathy and for assistance!

Helping assertively

Once you have genuinely listened to the other person and taken the conversation forward by responding reflectively, the issue or need that lies at the heart of the other person's story will gradually emerge. In some cases, your listening and empathy will be enough to help your counselee go back and face their struggles. But often a counselee is stuck in a situation and needs real help. Your task as a pastor, usually together with the family and the church, is to support him or her with words and actions aimed at creating a breakthrough in the situation.

We call this 'helping assertively'. Assertive does not mean aggressive. Aggressive helpers are more occupied with their own performance than with the wellbeing of their counselees. They make decisions for him or her, get angry, accuse or humiliate. Their aim is to force a change, but in reality they often make things worse than they already were. The opposite of an aggressive pastor is a passive pastor. A passive pastor does not take responsibility for helping counselees because he is either too insecure or too lazy. He allows problems to fester without intervening. He doesn't have the courage to say 'no' to evil or wrongdoing or 'yes' to battling it. This kind of pastor, too, allows other people's situations to go from bad to worse.

An assertive pastor will often challenge the counselee to take a clearer stand for what he really thinks, feels or desires. Pastors easily get stuck in fixed patterns. An assertive pastor can challenge them to take specific steps towards breaking through those patterns and

finding a new perspective. This can apply to issues in the family in marriage, at work or in church. People can run aground in any of these settings. The steps needed to get back on one's feet and start afresh can be scary. As a pastor, you can encourage people in this, offering counsel and empathy, help and support. For example, you might ask questions like these: 'What possibilities do you see?', 'What do you want your life, or this specific situation, to look like one year from now?'

Shalom

Ultimately, God holds both the beginning and the end of our lives in his hands. If there is anything that can give us hope, courage and shalom, it is the deep confidence that God is with us, that our lives are in His hands and that there is nothing He cannot use to contribute to our shalom!

Part 5

Organising the church

Part 5 : Organising the church

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Introduction to part 5

Organising the church

Wherever people come to faith, they begin to meet together and form a faith community. This began with the first Christians who came to faith on the Day of Pentecost. They came together in each other's homes not only to receive teaching from the Scriptures and to pray, but also "to fellowship" (Acts 2:42). A few verses after this, we read that *"All the believers were together and had everything in common"* (verse 44). Believing is not something you do alone. The moment you come to faith in Jesus, you become a part of his body, a member of a very large, worldwide family. This family includes young and old, men and women, black and white, rich and poor. All these completely different people are bound together by the fact that each one has responded to Jesus' voice, received the same invitation from God, and said 'yes'. Each person who comes to faith gives his life to God and God then gives us to one another in order for us to follow and obey Jesus together and serve one another. These two aspects of Christianity are the pillars on which every congregation of Christ rests: honouring God and serving one's neighbour.

In this light, we can see the church as a place in which together we can practice following the instructions that God gave us back in the Ten Commandments and that Jesus used to sum up the law: to love God above all else and to love one's neighbour as oneself. We put this into practice when we honour God in our church services by singing together, praying, listening to his Word, baptising, and celebrating communion. We also practice this at other times in the church, such as when we give or receive teaching about who God is and how we are to walk with him. That is how we honour God. And we serve one another and our neighbour in Jesus' name through various forms of caring in the church. We encourage one another in the faith, we help each other through difficulties, and we share practical resources. But the church's assignment to serve is broader than this. We are to serve not only each other, but everyone we meet – and we are to do this in Jesus' name, giving witness to the One who

leads us in all of this.

This fifth part of The Pastors' Manual is about the organisation of the church of Christ. If you have been called to lead the church as a pastor, it is important for you to know which Biblical principles apply to the Christian church and how God wants His church to function. When Jethro counselled Moses on how to lead the Israelites through the desert, his fifth and final word of advice was: *“Select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens”* (Exodus 18:21). With these words, Jethro provided a model for leading not only God's people, but also the church of Christ.

What is a church?

The body of Christ

Organising your church begins with a Bible-based vision of the church. We will discover this vision if we look at the imagery the Bible uses to describe the church. Paul sometimes refers to the church as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:32), as a family in which we are each other's brothers and sisters and God is our Father (2 Corinthians 6:18) and as a house built for God with living stones (1 Peter 2:5).

The image used most in Scripture to describe the church, however, is that of a body. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Paul also elaborates more on this image than on others. Christ is our head, He leads the church (Ephesians 1:22-23 and 4:15-16). We who belong to the church are the members. We are all different, but inseparably bound up together. The hand and the foot cannot do without each other, and both are controlled by the head. If the church is Christ's body on earth today and every church member is a part of it (1 Corinthians 12:27), this means the church is called to do in today's world what Jesus did when He walked this earth. We are to serve God as He did, to learn to see things the way He did, to listen as He listened, to go where He would go to do what He would do. The church is to live on earth following the example set by Jesus. She represents Jesus now. Our head, Christ, is in heaven, but we are to be His hands and feet here on earth. What a privilege and what a task!

The suffering of the church

So the church lives on earth just as Jesus did when He was on earth. This means the church follows the same path, a path leading from cross to crown. Being a church means living under the cross. Like Simon of Cyrene in his day, we follow Jesus, carrying the cross (Luke 23:26). Simon went to Jerusalem to worship God, but was called to serve God by bearing the cross. Following Jesus as a church also means carrying the cross: *"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me"* (Matthew 10:38). This carrying of the

cross as a church means oneness with the suffering of Christ. Jesus himself said: *“A servant is not above his master, so you will be persecuted, too”*. This does not just apply to individual followers of Jesus, but also to His church.

The suffering of the church, first of all, Jesus says, occurs *“when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me”* (Matthew 5:11). Persecution has many faces. Sometimes it means imprisonment or even being tortured to death because of your faith in Jesus. At other times it takes on a subtler, legal form, or involves harassment or ridicule. Every church of Christ knows the experience of not being accepted in this world, regardless of how this rejection is expressed. In the words of Jesus: *“If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you”* (John 15:19). The church is only truly the church of Christ if she knows this suffering. It is the pain of being strangers, outsiders in society. It means being misunderstood and hated.

But this is not the only kind of suffering the church undergoes. As the church of Christ we also suffer under the brokenness of the world we live in. We pray with the words of a Christian leader: *“Lord, let our hearts be broken by what breaks your heart”*. The church suffers under the suffering of this world, she joins the whole creation in groaning (Romans 8:22-23). It is the suffering of empathy, it means weeping about things that happen, just as Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

A third form of suffering the church experiences is suffering under the sin and evil so prevalent in this world. The church sees this evil, puts its finger on sin and prays for forgiveness for those who sin against others or themselves. It means suffering under evil just as Jesus did on the cross, when He prayed: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34). The first martyr, Stephen, prayed similarly to his saviour: *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”* (Acts 7:60).

A fourth form of suffering occurs when as a church we suffer under our own sins. As believers we know that the power of sin was broken by Jesus on the cross and that, therefore, we are free and able to live without sin. At the same time, we share Paul's experience: "I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:19). Suffering under our own sin as a church often means suffering under a lack of unity, both within our own congregation and among different congregations. The unity Jesus so eagerly desired (John 15 and 17) is so often lacking; self-interest so often takes priority over Christ's interests. Blessed is the church that truly suffers under this failure: it will surely transcend itself.

Thus the church's path in life is like the one Christ walked on earth: it is the path of the cross. A church without suffering is no church at all! Jesus gained the victory, but ultimate deliverance will not be ours until his return. Until that time, the church joins Paul in saying: *"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead"* (Philippians 3:10-11). We know His kingdom will break through, but until it does we suffer for Christ's sake and wait *"more than watchmen wait for the morning"* (Psalm 130).

The dual orientation of the church

The church suffers and eagerly awaits the return of her Lord. In the meantime, we do not sit still in a corner, but get on with our commission. As a church suffering in a broken world we have a dual commission: to love God above all else and to love our neighbour as ourselves. This means the church is also moving in two directions: inward, in honouring and worshipping God, and outward, in serving and witnessing to those around us.

The apostle Peter puts it like this: *"you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."* (1 Peter 2:9). So the church is made up of people God has chosen and set apart from those around them. We have

been called from the darkness of a life ruled by sin. This is why in his epistle Peter refers to the believers as exiles. Our goal, therefore, is not to be successful in this world. The goal we have as the church of Christ is to honour God and to serve our neighbour. So, God sends the same people He has called out of the world back into the world to declare his praises. God does not just want to save those He has called to become a member of the church, He wants to use them to extend that same invitation to others. The church is a community of saved people commissioned to go out offer others salvation.

Chapter 2

Love God above all else

We saw in the first chapter that the church moves in two directions: inward (honour God) and outward (love your neighbour). The inward orientation, honouring God, involves two aspects that we will look at in this chapter and the next.

The church is the place on earth where believers come together to honour and worship God together, because they love God more than anything else. This inward orientation is part of the church's calling as *"a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation"* (1 Peter 2:9). The church, in the first place, is a fellowship of believers who are committed to their Lord and come together to worship Him. The first place to hear the heart-beat of the church, therefore, is the worship service.

The worship service

What does it mean to worship God in a worship service? Psalm 105:1-3 offers a beautiful description: *"Give praise to the LORD, proclaim His name; make known among the nations what He has done. Sing to Him, sing praise to Him; tell of all His wonderful acts. Glory in His holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice"*. There is nothing we would rather do as a church than to join believers all over the world in singing about who God is, what He has done and what he is still going to do. The worship service is characterised by concentration on God; it is all about Him. In this way we give God the place of honour He deserves in our congregation and in our personal lives. During the worship service, we realise once again: *"From Him and through Him and for Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen"* (Romans 11:36).

Worshipping together

Of course, you can worship God when you are alone or at home, there is something special about worshipping in the congregation, with the whole church. Our worship services connect us with one another and with believers worldwide. In the worship service we get

a taste of what Paul describes in Ephesians 3: *“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God”* (Ephesians 3:17-19). We need each other, both in the local church and in the worldwide church, to rise above our own limited existence in worshipping God and to discover more and more of his greatness and goodness together. Singing together is not the same as singing on your own. Praying together is also different than praying alone. Jesus says: *“If two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”* (Matthew 18:19-20). So worshipping God together really has an extra dimension.

Worshipping in the Spirit and in truth

In his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), Jesus speaks about worshipping God. He stresses that what matters is not where or exactly how you worship God, but that we worship him *“in the Spirit and in truth”* (John 4:24). This means worship is not about fixed habits or rituals. It is not a religious custom, but a spiritual fellowship with God. It is not the place or the time that matters, but the attitude of our heart. Worshipping God in the Spirit and in truth means turning our whole heart to God and being honest and sincere in our worship. You can come to God and worship him just as a child comes to his father to sit on his lap and to enjoy his nearness and loving care.

Baptism

The worship service is not only a place and time for the church to read and listen to God’s word and to sing and worship him together, it is also the place where new church members are baptised. The worship service is the best place to do this, because baptising is also a form of worship.

Jesus commissioned the church to baptise new converts when He

sent out His disciples: *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 28:19). People in Jesus' day were familiar with baptism in water. John the Baptist offers us the most well-known example. Crowds of people came to him to be baptised in the River Jordan. It was a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. It involved confession of guilt and the baptism itself symbolised the washing away of guilt and forgiveness by God. It was also a bath signifying new life and a new obedience to God (Matthew 3:5-6). Jesus also received this baptism from John. In this way He immersed Himself in the sins of the people, showing His intention to take upon Himself all our sin and brokenness. But when Jesus came to be baptised, John said: *"I baptise you with water... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire"* (Matthew 3:11). John meant that thanks to Jesus the outward, symbolic cleansing and change brought about for believers by water become inward and real through the Spirit.

Whoever is baptised belongs to Jesus. Being immersed in water is symbolic for dying and rising up from the dead with Jesus. Paul writes in Romans: *"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly also be united with Him in a resurrection like His"* (Romans 6:3-5). Being baptised means accepting what Jesus did for us when he died on the cross and rose from the grave. He did that for us, with our names and lives in mind. When we are baptised, God shows us it is truly for us, that we, too, died and were raised with Jesus. It is like parents paying off a college debt for a child and giving their son or daughter a document to prove it. The son or daughter will experience relief and a sense of being delivered from debt. In a similar way, baptism is like a statement undersigned by God that you have been delivered.

Baptism also marks the moment when as a believer you deliberately

say to God that you want to be His child and that you will always love and serve Him. In that sense, it is like a marriage between Jesus and the believer. He has demonstrated His love and now He asks us whether we will love Him, too. In baptism, we publicly say 'yes' to Him.

A baptism with water in the worship service, therefore, marks a special moment in the life of the believer. The water is symbolic, yet at the same time something very real takes place in the life of the person being baptised. The water shows us something of what God promises the Holy Spirit will now do. Something really changes in the heart and life of the person baptised. You now truly belong to Jesus and are bound up with him in every way. It means you are the recipient of all His love and grace, but also that you promise to place your life in His hands and to follow Him.

Does this mean believers who, for whatever reason, have not yet been baptised will not be saved and are not bound up with Jesus? No, it does not mean that. A believer can experience with Jesus what a man and a woman experience who love each other and share an intense connection even though they are not yet married. We do not need baptism in order to believe, but it does mark a special mutual commitment between God and ourselves. A person who has not received the sign of baptism is no less loved by God, but that public, visible and tangible confirmation of his relationship with God is absent.

Finally, it is important that when we baptise new believers, we do not only use water as a symbol of cleansing and of dying and being raised with Jesus, but also that we always baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In baptism, the triune God demonstrates his covenant with this believer as Father, Son and Spirit. The Father gives his love and care, the Son offers forgiveness of sin and the Spirit brings about a changed life. In this way God connects His name and heart to our name and to our entire life. As we become aware of what takes place when a person is baptised among the fellowship of believers, we cannot help but worship God!

The Lord's Supper

Another celebration frequently held in the church of Christ, in addition to baptism, is communion, or the Lord's Supper. This is also a commandment of Jesus. Paul says clearly in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 that he *"received from the Lord"* what he passed on to the believers (see also Matthew 26:26-29). Each time we break bread and drink wine as a congregation, we are reminded of what Jesus did when He gave his life for us on the cross. *"Do this in remembrance of me"* (1 Corinthians 11:24). So when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, as when we conduct worship services, we are to concentrate on Jesus Christ and what He has done for us. Thus celebrating communion is another form of worship: you focus on Jesus and praise Him for His sacrifice for us on the cross.

In baptism we are connected once and for all to Christ in His death and resurrection. The celebration of the Lord's supper offers us a reaffirmation of this several times a year. Again we hear about Jesus atoning death and we may feel with our senses that it is true and that He did for us. In breaking the bread, we realise that He allowed His body to be broken when He suffered and died on the cross. When we drink from the cup, we realise His blood was shed when he gave His life for us. He took my place and died for my sins, thereby offering me a new life with God. Amazing grace, amazing love! Each time we celebrate the Lord's supper together and turn our minds and hearts to Jesus and His death on the cross, we are reminded of this.

There is a lot of debating in the church as to whether the bread and wine literally are Jesus' flesh and blood. To me, the key issue in this discussion is that our partaking of the bread and the wine takes on a special meaning when we do it *"in remembrance of"* Jesus: the moment we eat the bread and drink the wine, something very real does happen in our hearts and lives. Heaven and earth touch and God is near in a very special way. As we eat and drink, we physically partake in Jesus' sacrifice for us and we cannot help but praise and thank Him in song and prayer. The Lord's Supper, like baptism, belongs in the church's worship service. Both sacraments lie at the heart of our life with God and will invariably lead us to worship Him!

Like baptism, celebrating communion centres on the bond between the believer and his or her Lord. This is why only believers are to participate in communion. And believers, Paul tells us, must be very conscious of participating with the right inward attitude: *“For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves”* (1 Corinthians 11:29). Ask yourself, therefore, whether you are really focused on Jesus and do not participate in the Lord's Supper carelessly. If you celebrate it with the right attitude, you will discover that concentrating on Jesus will cause your own soul to rise up in gratitude and joy.

The fellowship of the saints

Honouring God as a church is not only done by worshipping, it is also done through the bond we share as fellow members of the church of Christ. The church often refers to this as 'the fellowship of the saints'.

Koinonia

The Biblical word for this fellowship, this bond we share as believers, is the Greek word *koinonia*. It denotes a deep, spiritual bond that affects all our interactions. There is a lot more to it than just getting to know each other a little better; it even goes further than friendship, as it is not based on our personal preferences. It is a soul connection, a bond between people who have been through the same experience: we have all been saved by Jesus, we are all related to one Father, we are all on the way toward the same eternal joy. John talks about this special bond between believers In 1 John 1: *"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ"* (1 John 1:3). Our fellowship as believers, then, originates in the fellowship, the *koinonia*, between Father, Son and Spirit. As believers we are drawn into this bond of love, we are allowed to become a part of it. Jesus prays for this: *"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me"* (John 17:22-23).

God's *koinonia*, then, is the source of the *koinonia* among the believers. It is not our love for one another, but God's love within us that opens our hearts to one another. *"We love because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19). Our fellowship springs from God's fellowship with us. It does not, therefore, depend on our good will, rather we are given to one another by God and His love breaks open our hearts. This means the fellowship we enjoy is a gift from God, a gift of pure grace in which we are allowed to share.

This intimate bond we share, characteristically, rests on the realisation that our lives are built on one and the same foundation. Our identity is no longer determined by whether we are male or female, rich or poor, black or white, highly educated or hardly educated at all. Our identity lies in the fact that we are all children of the heavenly Father: we are all brothers and sisters of Jesus. We are God's children – that is what determines everything, what unites us. Paul states this clearly: *“There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:28). Our unity in Christ transcends all these differences. They no longer matter or hinder us, because the love of Jesus transcends all social, cultural and ethnic differences between people. This does not mean there are no more differences; it means we no longer use our differences to exclude people, but rather that we include one another in the body of Christ. Our very diversity enables us to serve one another and thus to glorify Jesus. Quite practically, this means we may ask ourselves individually how we can serve the church as a whole with our unique qualities, whatever those may be.

Spiritual fellowship means sharing what we have received or learned from God. For example, think of what Paul wrote to the believers in Rome. He longed to meet with them: *“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith”* (Romans 1:11-12). Within the church of Christ we share our spiritual gifts with each other, the things we have discovered in our walk with God and with which we can bless others. For example, think of helping each other to understand the Bible better. Or to learn to recognise God's voice when we pray. These and other gifts of the Spirit, the so-called *charismata*, have been given to the church. Not every believer has every gift, but together all of the gifts are present in the church. This means we can only experience the fullness of the Spirit in fellowship with one another. We need each other in the church in order to discover the many gifts of the Spirit and to apply them in our daily living.

Where this *koinonia* reigns, people do not only share everything spiritually, but also materially. This was immediately evident among the first Christians in Jerusalem. The Bible tells us: *“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need”* (Acts 2:44-45). A little further into the Book of Acts, we read again that *“that there were no needy persons among them”*, because they looked after each other in everything (Acts 4:34-35). *Koinonia*, or fellowship with one another and with Jesus, means there are to be no differences that might hinder us from loving one another. If one member of the church of Christ is very wealthy and another is very poor, the former will help the latter. This is not a commandment, but the natural outcome of love and fellowship. You just do it, without questioning, without grumbling, without objection. By the way, this does not only apply to money and possessions, but also to the giving of time and attention. Within the church of Christ we are there for each other, to talk, to encourage, to help lend a helping hand, to give genuine attention. There is no need for anyone within the church of Christ to lack anything – whether spiritually, socially or financially!

The serving church

We have seen now that as church members we have an inward orientation that leads us to worship God and have fellowship with one another. At the same time, the church has an outward orientation. This outwardness centres on two assignments: serving and witnessing.

Salt of the earth and light of the world

'The believers, and therefore the church, are the salt of the earth and the light of the world,' Jesus says in Matthew 5:13-14. This means two things. To begin with, the two images Jesus uses here tell us that we are to be distinctly different from those around us, there is to be a clear contrast between the church and the world. We are not the rice or the potatoes, but the salt sprinkled on them. We are not the main course, instead we are the flavouring. Salt is used in every home to add flavour. A Christian is someone who makes different choices than the people around him, because his priorities are different and he is not self-serving. This attitude sometimes bothers people around us, or surprises them, but at least it makes them think. In Jesus' day salt had another function: it was used to prevent food from going bad. For instance, meat was preserved by rubbing salt on it; that way you could store it longer. This, too, is the task of every believer. You are different, you are salt, which means you resist evil in society: bad morals, wrong choices, self-centredness, abuse of power, pure materialism or corruption. You combat injustice and poverty, loneliness and lack of care, exploitation and abuse. A believer is someone who adds flavour and resists decay.

This also applies to the role of the church in society. In villages and cities, the church of Christ is the salt of the earth, the light of the world. The local church has received all it needs from the Lord Jesus Christ and this is the commission he has given: *"In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16). As a congregation you are salt and light by default, simply because you

belong to the body of Christ – but what you do with that is your responsibility. That is why Jesus says in this passage: you are salt, you are light, but do not let the salt lose its saltiness and make sure you let your light shine. The church, because of what she is, has a job to do in this world. Being salt and light is both a gift and a task!

Serving

The church has been called to serve its surroundings. Many Bible passages speak of this. In Jeremiah 29, the people of Israel, having been defeated by the armies of Babylon, has been exiled from Israel to the city of Babel. There the Israelites find themselves strangers and exiles in an alien environment: they do not feel at home there and would like to leave as quickly as possible. False prophets appear, promising them that God will soon get them back to Jerusalem, but God gives the prophet Jeremiah a very different message to pass on to the exiles: *“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper”*” (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

The first assignment to the church is to deliberately take its place in society, even if that society is hostile and the church is seen as an outsider. Do not withdraw behind your church walls, but take part in building up society. If you want your church to be salt and light, to add flavour and resist decay, your first priority is to be present where society is shaped, where decisions are made, where people live and work together. Just as God told His people through Jeremiah that they were in Babel because God led them there, the church, too, must realise that it must play its part right where it is located, here and now. You are not where you are by accident; God has a plan, through His church He wants to do something in this village or town. That explains this appeal to the Israelites in Babel and to the church

in its place: take part in building up society.

The most important instrument at the church's disposal in all of this is prayer. Pray to the Lord for the village or city to which he has led you. Pray for those governing it, pray for its population. Every believer knows that if you pray for something or someone, your heart will be moved with compassion for that person or situation. If you pray for a city, you will begin to love and serve that city. God commands us to *“seek the peace and prosperity of the city”*. A congregation that desires to add flavour will only see that desire fulfilled if it genuinely cares about the peace and prosperity of its city, or village, and those living in it. This sincere concern will lead you as a church to seek ways of serving the community, combatting evil and promoting good.

The Bible shows us what it means to do good in a key passage of Scripture that can also help the church to fulfil its role as salt of the earth and light of the world. It is a passage in which the prophet Micah answers the question of the people of Israel as to what they must do to serve and honour God. The answer is clear: *“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”* (Micah 6:8). This is a clear programme for every believer – as well as for every fellowship of believers, every church. A servant attitude towards God and a desire to give him first place in all you do as a church will lead you to act justly. This means that every person is taken seriously. Whether people are entrepreneurs or labourers, men or women, young or old, rich or poor – each one is equally important, equally precious, equally entitled to genuine attention. This is what we commit ourselves to as a church in our town or city. And it requires us to be faithful, too. The Hebrew word used in Micah has a special reference to defending the rights of those who cannot defend themselves. It means having an eye for forgotten groups, or vulnerable people. This is our God-given task as believers and as a church. This is how we are to be salt, adding flavour and resisting decay, and light in the dark. This is what makes the church of Christ visible and relevant.

Another Bible passage in which Jesus outlines the task of the church is the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. The message here is that whoever crosses our path is our neighbour, and that we are to open our hearts and hands to them, even if they are people we would prefer to avoid. It is precisely in such situations that the Bible's golden rule applies: *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (Romans 12:21). The Samaritan in the story told by Jesus did what he could, even incurring costs, out of compassion for the man he found lying by the roadside. Jesus ends the parable with these words: *"Go and do likewise"* (Luke 10:37). As a church we must not turn a blind eye to the needs of people around us, but instead help them on their feet and on their way. This is the servant attitude God wants us to develop, this is how the church can truly show itself to be the body of Christ on earth.

The witnessing church

The church's outward orientation involves two aspects: serving and witnessing. If as a church we only serve and do good works, without ever explaining why we want to serve those around us, we miss out on an opportunity to share Christ's love for us and for others. Serving without witnessing is a missed opportunity, while witnessing without serving is just hollow phrases! The two belong together. Sometimes a conversation or testimony will start things off, in other situations an act of service will be the trigger. But the one cannot do without the other.

Witnessing

Witnessing, in addition to serving, is a key word for the church. After His resurrection, Jesus said to His disciples: *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations"* (Matthew 28:19). A short while later, at His ascension, He said: *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 1:8). The church is to be a witnessing church and its testimony is to be clear. It is the testimony of John the Baptist and of Jesus: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near"* (Matthew 4:17). When we testify about Jesus, we testify to sin and grace, being lost and getting saved, being inwardly sick and receiving healing, moving from spiritual death to life. As a church we can present this message in many ways, but the core must never be hidden.

Paul, who shared the gospel wherever he journeyed, offers us a good example of witnessing. In Romans 1, He explains this compulsion to testify: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile"* (Romans 1:16). So the heart of his testimony is the gospel of Jesus.

A good example is the sermon Peter delivered on the Day of Pentecost. He testified to the cross and the resurrection of Jesus

without hesitating to tell his listeners, the people right in front of him, that they were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. *"When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins' (Acts 2:37-38).* His radical message evoked a radical response: that very day, 3,000 people were baptised. Our testimony certainly does not always get a positive response like that. Sometimes we meet with ridicule, or outright hostility. But we must not let this stop us from placing Jesus at the very centre of our testimony.

When Jesus sent out his disciples to testify about Him in Matthew 10, he warned them extensively about what they were to expect as His witnesses: *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves"* (Matthew 10:16). In a hostile society, a witnessing church is vulnerable. The right attitude in witnessing involves choosing the right moments, people and places. A snake waits and watches, too, before it strikes. At the same time, we must remain innocent and naive, like a dove. If we feel an inner compulsion to witness, we must simply do it! If you feel a desire to share about Jesus here and now, do not hold back. Seize every opportunity God gives you. So don't be foolish or reckless, but don't lose yourself in preparing strategies and plans to go out and witness either.

Jesus warns us as His witnessing church that we will be persecuted because of our testimony. The Greek word for witness is *martyrion*. A martyr is a witness who has paid a price for his testimony. But Jesus adds something else to the warning He gives every witnessing believer and every witnessing church: *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows"* (Matthew 10:29-30). The vulnerable sheep facing the wolves have just one defence: the good Shepherd!

A very important guideline to follow in witnessing as a church is that we testify only of what we ourselves have heard, seen and experienced in our walk with Jesus. A witness is someone who was there when something happened and is so full of it that he wants to talk about it to other people, so that they might experience it, too. Witnessing as a church, therefore, is not a matter of dryly reciting the truths of the Bible, but rather of weaving in your own story with Jesus to show others that He is inviting them to follow Him, too. Remind yourself of what He means to you and share that joy of walking with God when you talk about the faith with unbelievers.

Finally, sharing about your life with God is a great responsibility, because it means people will scrutinize your walk and talk. Rarely will they take you at your word; their interest will not be aroused until they see that you really practice what you preach. Paul called the church of Corinth *“a letter from Christ”* (2 Corinthians 3:3). Most people will not immediately start reading the Bible, they will first read the person who has told them about it, the witness, or the witnessing church. We can only truly be church that points to Jesus if our walking and talking, and the way we treat each other, demonstrate that we are indeed full of Jesus. If the church practices what it preaches, God can use it mightily. Through its testimony and service, He will build his kingdom.

The structure of the church

In the previous chapters we looked at the church's dual orientation – the inward orientation of worshipping God and having fellowship together, and the outward orientation of serving and witnessing to those around us. In order to fulfil this dual assignment properly, we need a supporting structure. So how do you organise the church in such a way that its structure will help the church members to perform their task towards God, each other and the world around them?

If we look at how Jesus did this during His time on earth, we see that He always interacted with people on three levels. He frequently addressed large crowds, He took time for personal encounters, but his primary focus was on a small group of twelve disciples. These three angles can be very helpful to us as a church, too.

Worship services and house groups

It is important for the church to come together as a whole in worship. The worship service is the place where we can worship God together as well as being encouraged and receiving teaching. The primary goal of these larger meetings is for us to worship God together and to listen to the preaching of his word. Jesus also had large meetings like this, when the crowds followed him and he explained the principles of God's kingdom to them. This is a form of meeting in which the preaching and teaching does not involve conversation. The emphasis is on receiving the teaching or encouragement God wants to give us. When these meetings are over, the church members all return to their own homes and families.

This explains why central meetings or worship services alone will never suffice for a church, unless it is a small home church. But even a home church, when its numbers grow to 30 or 40, is too big for intensive sharing and caring. It is important for us to observe how the first church combined central worship services with smaller get-

together at home. In Acts 2, the model of the first church is clearly outlined: *“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts”* (Acts 2:46). So they were familiar with the two sides of church life: the collective worship services at the temple and the small groups at home.

House groups, or cell groups

House groups, or cell groups, have two important functions in the church: teaching and different levels of caring. As far as teaching is concerned, the small setting of the house group gives participants opportunity to share with each other what they heard in the sermon. The house group is the place for discovering how we can put into practice the Biblical message presented in the worship service. In a house group you can think about the implications of the message together and help each other apply it in everyday life. House groups, following up on the preaching in the worship service, are the best place for teaching in the church.

The second function of house groups is caring. In the small setting of a house group, participants can genuinely be a part of one another's lives. Just as a child is raised up towards maturity in the small setting of the family, we develop spiritual maturity in a small house group. This setting offers room for questioning, searching and sharing. It is the place where we provide basic pastoral care for one another, where we are aware of one another's needs and where together we can look after each other. It is also the place where you can pray for others and others can pray for you: more than most other settings, a small house group, in which you share your joys and sorrows, offers room for personal intercession. This is why it is important that there is plenty of opportunity for prayer in your house group. The house group is thus like a nuclear family within the church's wider circle of extended family.

It is difficult to say exactly how big a house group should be. The important thing is that it must be big enough to allow you to give different members different tasks, and small enough for the

members to grow close and to genuinely care for one another. Generally, a small group within the wider church should consist of about 10 to 15 adults. That is not including the children.

Leadership in the church

In the first part of The Pastors' Manual we looked at the leadership role that every pastor has. In this last chapter we will focus mainly on the organisational side of this leadership.

When it comes to church leadership, one of the basic principles laid down in the Bible is that church leadership is always shared leadership. Servant leadership means shared leadership! We see this clearly in Acts 6:1-7. It is wonderful to note that the apostles didn't step forward and solve the problem between two groups of believers, but instead gathered all the believers together to look for a wise way of dealing with the situation together. *"It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables"*, they said (Acts 6:2).

They did not mean that preaching is more important than serving food, but that the latter was not their calling. They had been called to preach and to pray and the other work was to be left to people called in that direction. The twelve apostles then appointed seven deacons to take over the food distribution. These deacons, they said, must be *"known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom"*, meaning that they had to be both spiritual and practical. The church agreed and chose seven men. Among them were Philip, who was already well-known, and Stephen.

The principle the disciples demonstrated here is that not everyone has to do everything in the church. God calls each church member into his service, giving each person gifts to serve him and the church. Preachers are not the only ones with a calling; believers performing other tasks have been called by God as well. Neither is one task more important than any other! We learn from the Jesus' parable of the bags of gold that what matters is not how many gifts or tasks you have, but what you do with what God has given you (Matthew 25:14-30). Look what happened after the apostles and the church in Jerusalem decided to delegate tasks to different members: *"So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased*

rapidly" (Acts 6:7).

Five ministries

This means that the pastor should never have the sole responsibility for leading the church. Paul mentions elders several times – and always in the plural. The church is to be led by a team of people who have been called to this task, who have the right gifts for it and who together can take care of the entire church. One might preach, another might lead the pastoral work, a third might lead in providing practical support.

In Ephesians 4, Paul mentions one of these leadership teams, listing five ministries that should be represented: *"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up"* (Ephesians 4:11-12). The way Paul describes this shows us that he is not just talking about the church of Ephesus, but rather presenting a model of how Jesus wants to organise and build his church. This means that in our churches we must seek to identify individual members who together have these five gifts. Together they can set up and run the church according to God's will. So what kind of people are they?

1. Apostle

The apostle is the one who plants the church. As it grows more mature, he moves on to set up a new church or ministry. He is often the linking pin between the local church and other churches, sometimes even in other countries. An apostle is often a person passing through in the church, a pioneer who starts things off in God's kingdom, mobilises people for Jesus, and then moves on.

2. Prophet

The prophet sees to it that the church remains faithful to God and to its calling in the world. The prophet is a defender of an upright relationship with God and calls people to obedience, he keeps them alert. Prophets have a strong sense of justice and are quick to sense when things are being done with wrong motives.

3. Evangelist

The evangelist is the person who in a very natural way can touch people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. He easily connects with people and cannot stop talking about the new life that he has received and that is available to others. He introduces new people to the church and makes other people enthusiastic about Jesus.

4. Pastor, or shepherd

he shepherd's primary focus is on the spiritual wellbeing and growth of church members. He helps church members to care for one another and to be there for one another. A shepherd sets a good example in these areas himself.

5. Teacher

The teacher is the one who by studying the Bible and other related books presents new insights and clear teaching in order to help the church grow in knowledge and wisdom. He helps church members grow in their walk with God step by step.

These five kinds of leadership are present in every congregation, but sometimes we have to look for them, or to make people aware of gifts they have already received. These five gifts together enable the church as a whole to *"grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ"* (Ephesians 4:15). These gifts are not reserved exclusively for men; God gives gifts to all believers, including the women in your church. Make sure that in dividing tasks in the church you do not rob them of the opportunity to use their gifts for God's kingdom.

Sometimes these five gifts are present within the group of elders, but not necessarily. What matters is that the church offers room for each type of leader to serve. Actively seek these people out and give them a place in your congregation in which their gifts and calling will blossom.

A church, organised in this biblical way, will receive the blessing of worshipping God, living as a true unity, serving the world and testifying about Jesus abundantly!

The Pastors' Manual

In this Pastors' Manual author Ron van der Spoel brings together twenty years of experience as a senior pastor in churches in The Netherlands and over 10 years of experience in teaching more than a thousand pastors in Africa, South-East Asia, and the Middle East. Most of these pastors live and work in the context of persecution and poverty.

Asked how he came to the structure and content of this Pastors' Manual, pastor Ron van der Spoel answered: "Thinking and praying about how to teach and encourage pastors around the world, I felt the Holy Spirit pointing out to me the words that Jethro speaks to his son-in-law Moses. Moses leads the people of Israel through the desert to the promised land. He sees that Moses is leading this large group of people all by himself and that both Moses and the people wear themselves out. Then Jethro gives Moses five pieces of advice in order to lead the people of God in a sound way to their destiny. It is these five pieces of advice that form the five parts of this Pastors' Manual."

The aim of this Pastors' Manual is not to give a complete and comprehensive practical theology. What this Manual does is give some Biblical and practical insight into the five fields every pastor works in.