

The Cure of Souls—How Can Christian Leaders Fulfill Their Role?

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I recently posted on Facebook a brief thought about the “cure of souls,” borrowing a phrase from Gregory the Theologian (Gregory Nazianzen, d. 390 AD).

Some church leaders are so concerned about the “care of souls” that they forget that the main goal is the “cure of souls.”

I was asked for more and encouraged to post something more about the “cure of souls.”

The Cure of Souls

Everything the church leader does is focused on the cure of souls—helping people find the spiritual healing they so much need. Amidst a host of activities, all is ultimately focused on helping people come to know and love God more completely. All else is peripheral. As church leaders, whether we deal with people who do not know Christ or those who have begun a faith journey, we have the same goal—the cure of souls. We seek in the lives of those we touch and those we lead more than mere spiritual existence—we seek and are responsible for the spiritual health of souls—the cure of souls.

Gregory Nazianzen (not to be confused with Pope Gregory I, also known as Gregory the Great, d. 604 AD) wrote that the work of pastors and the work of pastoral ministry is to strengthen people, a task that is done through teaching. John Chrysostom, fourth century contemporary of Gregory, described the goal as spiritual health. A good definition of health is the ability to do the things that are usual and expected in a particular context and life stage. Attaining spiritual health is more difficult than it may appear at first. The goal is not the simple presence of spiritual life; the goal is effective functioning.

Church leaders who understand that they are called to do more than care—that they are called to cure, are committed to administering the treatments suitable for the soul. The idea is parallel to the work of a medical doctor. Physicians have medicines and treatments they can prescribe. Spiritual leaders have teachings that let them apply the needed remedies, words that are effective because the source of all spiritual disease is in the heart and mind. The “cure of souls” is at the heart of church leadership.

Jesus frequently used the metaphor of healing to describe his work as Savior. The work of God’s leaders in every age is no different. The primary sphere of healing is the soul. Continuing the metaphor, spiritual healing is made possible by treatments that touch the soul. Physical medicine treats problems of the body; pastors treat thoughts and feelings, habits and reactions, values and commitments, moral direction. Peter’s description of the “hidden person of the

¹ For those interested in exploring how church leadership was understood in the early centuries of Christianity, I recommend Christopher A. Beeley, *Leading God’s People: Wisdom from the early church for today* (Eerdmans, 2012). Everett Ferguson’s *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries* remains a helpful resource after almost 50 years. Beeley, an Episcopal priest and Associate Professor of Anglican Studies at Yale Divinity School, captures well the focus of various early church leaders on Scripture. This article contains a condensation of the last half of Beeley’s work.

heart” is similar (1 Pet. 3:4). Spiritual healing is difficult. It takes time to discern where people’s points of need are. People tend to resist such intrusion. People are often self-deceived and are easily deceived by others. Some people want to hide their weaknesses and diseases.

Despite these challenges, the cure of souls is the basic method and the basic goal of all ministry—pastors-elders, pastors-preachers, missionaries, however one may describe the ministry role. Those who would be genuine spiritual leaders must administer the treatment—God’s transforming grace—in a way that meets the needs of many different people in many different circumstances. Not only do external circumstances vary, people come to church leaders with many different spiritual conditions, not the least of which is the level of spiritual maturity. As the physician treats children and adults differently, so also the one focused on “curing souls” must recognize different levels of spiritual maturity.

Regardless, the competent pastor applies the treatment that is most needed. Like the physician who has a range of medicines, the church leader is acquainted with a full range of spiritual treatments. The medicine chest of the church leader must be filled with many different remedies. Put another way, the church leader is well-equipped with the treasure chest of Christian Scripture, biblical theology, and spirituality. This background allows clear and specific diagnosis, and allows the appropriate treatment for each need. The church leader is both pathologist and prescriber, identifying problems and prescribing solutions, remembering always that the healing that is sought comes only in Christ.

The Power of Scripture

God enables church leaders to guide people by means of the Bible. What is needed in the cure of souls is a word from God. The power for learning what is right, seeing what is wrong, desiring correction, and walking in God’s way is in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, at the center of vibrant church leadership is one’s life in God’s Word. The study of Scripture is at the heart of inspiring, effective church leadership. Church leadership is by definition biblical and theological. The most practical help that church leaders can receive week after week for developing the ability to serve well in meeting spiritual diseases is the study of Scripture that yields spiritually rooted leaders.

One must resist the idea that genuinely effective ministry exists only in the daily world of human physical needs, that spiritual ministry is somehow less practical and thus secondary. Described in the phrases that frame this essay: the temptation is to focus on caring (often physical) and to forget the curing (a host of spiritual needs, including salvation). Church leadership is theological by definition, and the primary concern of the God’s leader is spiritual. There is, and always has been in church history, a need for theologically grounded leaders.

Scripture is a primary resource. The centrality of the Bible in the life of faithful church leaders can hardly be exaggerated. Bible study and good understanding are essential to effective healing of souls. The church leader who demonstrates care and compassion for people, but fails in maintaining a spiritual focus on soul-health, can hardly help people find the cure. Only

with committed Bible study can the leader grow spiritually, developing the ability to lead people over the path to soul-curing, salvation and spiritual health.

Coming full circle, church leadership is theological and biblical in its origin, definition, method, and ultimate goal. Church leaders are administrators—administrators of God’s grace for all, so that souls are cured in Christ Jesus. Church leadership is anchored in a lifetime of study and learning, so that those who are chosen to serve as pastors are also among the oldest and wisest. Study and prayer are among the most practical of activities for the one who wishes to be involved in the “curing of souls.”

The Ministry of the Word

Nothing is more important in the life of the church, and in the outreach of the church, than that the word be distributed. Biblical church leadership is first of all about the ministry of the word. Without maintaining a “face to face” relationship with the Word, how can church leaders correct those who speak things that are different and unhealthy (Tit. 1:9-10). People in our world are starving for spiritual nourishment. Where are the church leaders who can feed and nourish those of faith and those who are seeking faith? The ministry of the Word rescues all. The teaching of Scripture is the primary task of church leaders.

The job is difficult because life is hard and people are starved. The job is difficult because our contemporary culture leads us to caring and not to curing, believing that the cure of souls is subjective and that no objective treatments exist. The job is difficult because a different set of expectations have been developed in most churches. The roles of church leaders, elders, pastors, missions, evangelism, ministry—all have been redefined so that the place of the Word of God has been diminished. Such is the natural result of a postmodern society that has no room for the concept of objective truth, even when such truth can “cure souls.”

Finally, speaking more personally, I must admit that Christian leadership is a curious mixture of divine and human concerns. The goal of the leader is to bring light to all, but we who strive to serve as church leaders are not perfect. We can only hope that in seeing and admitting our frailty that we somehow bring glory to God. Therefore, in these words, I have not laid out the kind of church leader I have been across 50+ years of preaching and teaching, in local churches, in universities, and in various mission fields. I have laid out the goal of the leader who is eager to toil diligently in the Word, not only for his own sake but for the sake of others (1 Tim. 4:14-16), constantly teaching the Word of God because the first priority is the “cure of the soul.”