

How to Keep a Good Pastor

In previous articles I have shared that there is a strong correlation between pastoral tenure and church health based on the available research. I have also shared some of the principles and practices that will help pastors *stay put, stay healthy, and stay focused on their call*.

I assure you the association is working hard on the *pastor-side* of the tenure issue. But there is also a *church-side*. There are clear biblical practices for how a church should relate to their pastor. If these practices are implemented, a church will be much more likely to keep a good pastor.

Notice I said “good.” I realize there are behaviors that can disqualify a man from ministry leadership. In ministry circles we refer to these as MELT-down factors: moral, ethical, legal, or theological issues in which the pastor’s unbiblical behavior or teaching requires his removal. I am not advocating that we ignore such MELT-downs for the sake of pastoral tenure. What I am saying is that when you have a man who is devoted to fulfilling the call of pastor in a God-honoring way, the church is doing itself a favor if they do everything they can to help him stay. *It is in the best interests of a church to keep a good pastor.*

So how do you do that? Here are four practices based on instructions given to churches in the New Testament Epistles.

1. *Hold your pastor in high esteem.* 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 (ESV) says, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.”

Notice that holding the pastor in high esteem is closely related to *proper submission to spiritual authority*. The problem is that we personal-autonomy-driven, do-your-own-thing Americans don’t really like the idea that someone is “over us in the Lord,” much less that they might “admonish” us by confronting our behavior with the clear teachings of Scripture. In the church we need to get over our authority problem. We are to respect the pastor and hold him in high esteem in love, properly submitting ourselves to the spiritual authority that God has established in His church. Notice also the connection between proper submission to spiritual authority and *peace in the church*. Whenever there is an authority problem there is going to be a unity problem, too. I promise you that those who stir up conflict in the church are not ones who hold the pastor in high esteem.

2. *Follow your pastor’s leadership.* Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Now there is one of the least favorite words of American adults – “obey.” In the church it means that we are to follow the pastor’s leadership. This Scriptural practice runs counter to the “hireling” model of pastoral ministry which is very common in churches. In the “hireling” model, pastors are viewed as hired hands to provide religious services to the church members, but not to lead them. That is dead wrong. Whatever the process that was used to install him in the local church, the pastor is called by God and accountable to God for “keeping watch over your souls.” That is a leadership function. Notice in the Hebrews passage that it is in the flock’s best interest to cooperate with the shepherd’s leadership rather than to oppose him.

3. *Give your pastor a break.* In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul described those called to the gospel ministry this way: “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”

Up to this point you might be thinking that I have an idealistic view of pastors. Having been one, and knowing a bunch of them, I can tell you that I am forever cured of such a notion. Pastors are human beings, “jars of clay” with problems and weaknesses and temptations and prone to making mistakes. Why God puts his treasure in such dirt containers can only be explained by His grace – and by His desire to point people to Himself, not to fallible men. So what is the lesson here for a church that wants to keep a good – not perfect, but good – pastor? Give him a break! He struggles, he gets discouraged, and he makes mistakes. Satan wants to use the pastor’s “jar of clay” to overwhelm him with discouragement and to drive a wedge between him and God. The Lord wants to use it to strengthen the pastor’s ministry through greater dependence on Him. Church, whose side are you on? Give your pastor a break. Encourage him in the Lord. Every pastor needs that.

4. *Meet your pastor’s needs.* Galatians 6:6 lays down a simple principle: “One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches.”

Providing generously for the pastor and his family is to be a priority of the church. Having a pastor is not like buying a car where your goal is to negotiate the lowest possible price. The idea is, “How can we do the very best for our pastor?” This does not preclude bivocational ministry. In fact, there can be great advantages both for the pastor and the church when the pastor is bivocational. The issue is not full-time or bivocational; the issue is priority and generosity. The generous church that makes “sharing all good things with the one who teaches” a priority blesses itself.

Bottom line: *Church, it is in your best interests to do everything you can to keep a good pastor.* You have clear guidance from Scripture on how to do that. Are your words and actions in keeping with the four practices above?