

Fostering Spiritual Growth for the Pastor and His Family

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The very fact that your topic committee requested me to present an essay on, this subject would seem to indicate that you are aware of a danger and a need. That is wholesome. We can never remain static in our spiritual life—either we progress or we regress. Jesus said, “Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him” (Mk 4:25). The topic which you assigned indicates that you are not satisfied to have the spiritual life in your parsonages remain static. You would like to probe for the answer to the question: “What can be done to foster spiritual growth for the pastor and his family?” Undoubtedly I shall not be able to cover all the angles. But if what I do present stimulates thought and discussion, my coming to you will not have been in vain.

I. The Pastor

The subject as it was assigned mentions the pastor first. That’s good. Although there may be numerous exceptions, we might still put it down as an axiom: “As the spiritual life of a pastor goes, so goes the spiritual life of his family.” Subsequently we shall speak about the pastor’s wife, their children and then about the family as a unit. The general plan will be to discuss first the negative and then the positive of each item, rather than to list all of the negatives first and then the corresponding positives. That might call for too many mental gymnastics.

I,A,1. Professionalism

This is a danger which could undermine not only spiritual growth but even; spiritual life itself in the case of those who have been entrusted with some form of the public ministry. They may perform the same functions as those who are dedicated and humbly grateful, but their attitude is different. They have a job to do and will do it. They may even be quite efficient. They may even find a lot of satisfaction in their competence. But as his instruments are the tools of the physician’s trade, so the Bible is only the tool of their trade. It’s their job to use it and use it they will. Comparatively early in my ministry I met an unemployed candidate—there were many of them in the 30s—who had been turned off by a prominent Chicago pastor when he heard this pastor instruct his secretary about preparing the Sunday bulletin and concluding, “If there is any space left, throw in a few pious platitudes.” I have run into a few instances of such a flippant use of the Word myself. Such an attitude will hardly foster spiritual growth.

I,A,2,a. What is the antidote?

The cause of professionalism is that we use the sublime truths which the Word reveals so often that they tend to become self-evident, commonplace, to us. “Familiarity breeds contempt.” I believe that the best way to counteract this temptation lies in private devotions. They include the two elements which the Apostles mentioned when they said, “(We) will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Ac 6:4). Our prayers will include a confession of our sins, both the acknowledgment of the sinfulness of our old man and the mention of specific sins of which we became guilty since we were last before our Lord in prayer: losing our temper, the lustful look, coldness toward a troubled soul or whatever. Two extremes need to be avoided, thoughtless recital of a confessional formula on the one hand and, on the other hand, lingering long over specifics. After the prodigal son came to repentance, he did not remain in the pig sty for days berating himself

because of his sinful folly. Rather, he hurried to his father. So we shall hasten to focus upon grace. We shall recall the details of our Savior's humiliation: once his total change of status; again, his obedience to the law which he had once given for men to obey; or the ill treatment which he received from many of those whom he had come to save; or the brutal events of his great passion. We shall exclaim with Paul: "(He) loved me and gave himself for me" (Ga 2:20). We shall move on to recall the benefits of his life for us and his death for us: full forgiveness, perfect righteousness, the adoption and the inheritance. We shall think of the added grace which entrusted even us with the ministry, making Paul's words our own: "Although I am less than the least of God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8). Mindful of the injunction: "Forget not all his benefits" (Ps 103:2) we shall thank for the ongoing blessings which are new every morning and for the particular blessings which were given to us since we last engaged in private prayer. We shall have noticed that such devotions are permeated by the Word of God. Their effect will be that the coldly professional attitude toward our ministry will be replaced with a high sense of privilege. These thoughts are developed in somewhat greater detail in my article "The Spirit of Doxology in a Pastor's Life" in WLQ volume 74, p 250ff.

I,A,2,b.

I have already mentioned that when we speak to our Lord in prayer our prayers will be permeated by the Word of God. To combat professionalism I would also recommend the devotional use of the Word. That does not imply that we are not to be devotional when we work with the Word to prepare a sermon or get ready for a Bible class or prepare a devotion to be used with the sick. We shall ask not only what the Lord is here saying to our people but also what he is saying to us. But we shall also want to set aside some minutes each day just to read the Bible for our own edification. We want to read through the Bible from cover to cover again and again. My personal practice is to read at least 40 verses per day, once giving priority to the New Testament, then to the Old, and then to shift priorities when I have finished the New Testament. Following that plan I read through the New Testament in 9 months and through the Old Testament in less than 3 years. Old insights are refreshed and new insights are constantly gained. Human nature being what it is we need to be on our guard against using a system of Bible reading for system's sake. We want to read the Bible because we want our Lord to speak to us. The more the Bible wins our hearts the more shall we appreciate the privilege of sharing its precious contents with our people. When that is the case, we shall not be coldly professional but rather enthusiastic, warm and helpful.

I,B,1.

A second impediment to spiritual growth on the part of a pastor is self-pity. He may chafe under what has been called the fishbowl complex. He realizes that his life and the life of his family are under constant scrutiny both on the part of his members and on the part of the general public. He finds that he is constantly asking, "What are people going to say if I do this or say that?"

I,B,2.

But instead of fretting about this situation he ought to condition himself to welcoming it. After all, what Paul told Timothy is also a word of God directed to us: "Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tm 4:12). It has been said, "The only Bible which some people will ever read is the kind of life you lead as a Christian." This is especially true of us since we and our families have been set before the public eye. We shall create a favorable impression if people as they observe us see that we have a deep love for our Lord Jesus, a high respect for the Bible, a revulsion against sin and real joy in doing what is right. Our good example will not be without effect. Remember Jesus' words: "Let your light shine before men,

that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:13). This too is an incentive for spiritual growth.

I,C,1.

Another area in which self-pity may assert itself is in feeling overburdened with work. Sermons need to be written and preached and with the memory holy week fresh in your minds you know how often that can be. Funerals may have had to be conducted at times when we already were more than busy. Our weekly schedule may be crowded with meetings. Counseling sessions have to be arranged. Calls need to be made on the sick and shut-ins, on mission prospects, on delinquent members and on members in general to maintain contact with all of the sheep in our flock. Nor are demands made upon our time only by our parish. We are part of a synodical family. In this family there are various groupings: circuits, conferences, districts, the synod at large. There are meetings to attend, offices to be filled. In many areas there are intercongregational groupings concerned about educational and charitable endeavors and that means the same refrain of meetings to attend and offices to fill.

I,C,2.

First of all we need to remind ourselves that we are to be wise stewards of our time and energy. We don't have to do everything ourselves. There may be functions in the life and work of a congregation which our members can perform if we only supply guidance. We have been given to our congregations “to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:12). In the wider work offices can be distributed. There may come a time when we may have to decline to take on more work or even have to admit that we need to give up some function.

But we don't want to be in a hurry to refuse to take on more or to give up some office which we have been filling. Remember that the family of our Lord Jesus thought that he was working too hard: “Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’” (Mk 3:20,21). Comparing himself with the other Apostles Paul said, “I worked harder than all of them” (1 Cor 15:10). Sometimes it is good for us to feel swamped, inadequate, exhausted. For it is then that we recall the Lord's promises which suit our situation. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). “Our competence comes from God. He has enabled us to be ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:5,6). “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (Is 40:29). There have been times in my ministry when I began to panic because I felt overwhelmed by what had to be done. After I had some years of experience behind me I learned to ask myself in such situations, “Have you ever felt like this before? Did the Lord help you through? Is he still the same?” To turn to the Lord for help in times of pressure and to experience his power to help us leads to spiritual growth.

I,D,1.

Another area in which self-pity might show up is finances. We have a hard time making ends meet. We see our members and others enjoying luxuries which we cannot afford. We see professional people who spent no more time in getting their education than we rolling in wealth while we have a hard time meeting running expenses without knowing how we can possibly finance the education of our children or lay something aside for the proverbial rainy day or our retirement. Then it becomes easy to become envious, unhappy, and to indulge in self-pity.

I,D,2.

What's the antidote? The first step may be to scrutinize our standard of living. Are we demanding luxuries? Have we learned that it is no disgrace to say, "I can't afford it"? Beyond that it's a matter of letting the Lord train us. Jesus said: "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Lk 12:15). Paul writes: "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that" (1 Tm 6:6-8). Of himself he said: "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Php 4:11-13). Certainly we are to be wise stewards of our material resources, to plan ahead and to budget sensibly—if possible. But if that is not possible, if we are hard pressed just to keep food on the table and clothes on our back today, that does not mean that the end of the world has come. Jesus has taught us to pray only for today's supply of bread and has promised that our Father will provide it. And he'll be on the job tomorrow too. So it's one day at a time. Jesus says: "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Mt 6:34). When we approach the end of our road, we shall have to confess with the Psalmist: "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread" (Ps 37:25). When we have learned to be content and to put our trust in our heavenly Father's continuing care, we shall have overcome self-pity and in the process experienced spiritual growth.

I,E,1.

A feeling of hostility against his people on the part of a pastor, if it exists, can definitely undermine spiritual growth. This hostility might be directed against a few individuals who are burrs under the pastor's saddle. It might be directed against a clique or faction in his congregation. Or it could be a case where the pastor is pitted against his people and they against him like two armed camps. The pastor may have a just cause for complaint. But if he dwells upon it, it will work like a smoldering fire which will eat away at his spiritual life.

I,E,2.

Early in 2 Thessalonians Paul writes: "We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing" (1:3). But later on in the same letter he writes: "We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy, they are busybodies" (3:11). So he did not close his eyes to the facts. But he did not hold one aggravating factor in congregational life so closely before his eyes that he missed the entire picture. We can see him observing the same practice in 1 Corinthians and other epistles. I am not advocating an indifferent attitude toward the spiritual dangers of others or slackness in performing the admonitory portion of our ministry. But I am pleading that we keep our eyes open to the total picture and remember that also the spiritually weak are souls for whom Jesus shed his blood, souls in whom the Holy Spirit has made his temple. Viewing the entire picture will enable us to curb our own emotions and to suppress hatred and the desire for revenge and thus to grow spiritually.

I,F.

I should like to call attention to one more hint for promoting spiritual growth. Somebody hurts our pride. Instead of forgetting the incident, we dwell upon it. We review it again and again until doing so becomes almost an obsession with us. We seem to find abnormal pleasure in dwelling upon the incident. The devil takes advantage of the opening which we have left for him and moves us to recall as much as possible about other faults of the offender. We may go through a similar process after we have made a foolish mistake and seem to find pleasure in cutting ourselves down because of our incompetence. Needless to say, spiritual life does not flourish in such an atmosphere.

I,F,2.

Here Paul gives us good advice: “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Php 4:8). Whenever thoughts such as we have just described want to occupy us, we need to discipline ourselves and refuse to let them stay. Then we want to shift gears and make ourselves think about something which meets the requirements which Paul has suggested. It takes effort. But when we do it with the Lord’s help our outlook and mood will change for the better and we shall have made progress in sanctification and thus in spiritual growth.

If there is spiritual growth on the part of the pastor, he will exert a benign influence upon his family. But the assigned topic also calls for exploring means of directly promoting the spiritual growth of the family members.

II. The Pastor’s Wife

A. Much of what has been said about the spiritual growth of a pastor also applies mutatis mutandis to his wife. But she also has unique problems. Some which come to mind are loneliness, feeling that she is neglected by her pastor husband in favor of the congregation, feeling that too much of the responsibility for the care of the children devolves upon her.

II,B,1,a.

A recent book on family ministry¹ calls attention to the fact that the extended family is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. The term “extended family” refers to the fact that formerly the nuclear family (husband, wife and children) was not isolated. Often parents or other close relatives lived under the same roof while other relatives lived nearby. So the members of the nuclear family could in their relatives find intimacy, companionship, comfort and advice. With today’s mobile society and smaller homes such close contacts are not possible. As a result the nuclear family is reduced to isolation and the need to find intimacy only with its own members. Well, the greater majority of pastors’ wives has long since experienced that isolation.

II,B,1,b.

The book on family ministry to which I referred suggests that one way for the nuclear family to break out of its isolation is to become involved in the life and work of the church. This certainly provides an antidote for the loneliness which a pastor’s wife will experience. She has no specific leadership responsibilities because she is the wife of the pastor. Her immediate calling is to be a good wife, a good mother, a good homemaker. Still many opportunities for activity and service are open to her, perhaps even more than her prime responsibilities permit her to embrace. As she lives and works with the congregational family she will have little occasion to retire into the shell of brooding loneliness. Nor dare we forget to mention opportunities to get together with the wives of neighboring pastors. Any activity which makes her realize what a privilege it is to be part of the larger Christian family is bound to foster spiritual growth on the part of the pastor’s wife.

II,B,2.

¹ Charles M. Sell, Family Ministry, the Enrichment of Family Life through the Church. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.

We have mentioned that pastors' wives may be tempted to feel that their husbands are neglecting them by devoting too much of their time to their congregations. The question has been debated: Who comes first for a pastor, his wife or his congregation? This really is not a fair question, not if we consider the divinely assigned role of the pastor's wife as his wife. She is to be his helpmate, his complement. It was the role which she assumed when she married him. She was happy to assume it because she loved him. One way for her to fulfill her role is for her to want her husband to be a faithful pastor in every way. She will want him to do what his calling requires. She will not want to have him divert to her some of the time and energy which he ought to devote to the service of his people. On his part her husband will let her feel his love for his work. He will share his happy experiences with her. Staying within the limits imposed by confidentiality and the 8th Commandment he will also share his problems with her and solicit her understanding, comfort, prayers, yes, and her advice. He will thus treat her as his partner, not, indeed, because of a call but because of her marriage. As he thus helps her to understand in a very practical way the glory of the New Testament ministry he will be fostering her spiritual growth.

II,B,3.

The other concern which may burden a pastor's wife is that too much of the responsibility for the training of the children devolves upon her. This is closely akin to the complaint that too much of a pastor's time is devoted to his congregation, only with this variation that now it is the children who are being neglected, not the wife. Here we cannot appeal directly to the wife's supportive role, although it does enter the picture. If she can help her husband by assuming a greater portion of the day by day responsibility for the children, she will be willing to do that. We may get a better perspective if we move on to treat the matter of fostering the spiritual life of a pastor's children.

III. Children

A,1. One problem for children growing up in a parsonage is that they might feel that they are getting an overdose of religion. The father in family devotions reads what seems to them to be a very long part from the Bible, half of which they fail to understand even though it might be read from one of the highly touted contemporary translations. One man told me about an incident which occurred in his childhood. There was a rather large family of children. At mealtime the father read the 136th Psalm with the refrain in every verse: "For his mercy endureth forever." When this refrain had been repeated for the 10th time one of the youngsters began to giggle and the rest followed suit. That caused the lightnings to flash and the thunders to roll on Sinai. I don't think that much spiritual growth resulted from that devotion. Sometimes devotions are read from a devotional book which uses language which is over the head of younger children.

III,A,2.

What has been said is not intended to argue against family devotions. But the plea is to make them meaningful for all who take part. We cannot expect three year olds to understand everything, but we shall make an effort to make sure that they get something. Recognizing the limited attention span of younger children we shall keep the devotions brief. A few simple questions will help to determine how much has been understood. A short discussion about some point in the reading will stimulate interest and discover applications. In this process the father is not neglecting his children but rather is actively involved in seeking to foster their spiritual growth.

III,B,1.

One problem with which children in a parsonage may think they have to contend is that their fathers, yes, and their mothers, are too strict. Now we know that strictness is a relative term. But it can happen that

pastor fathers are too strict. Christian fathers in general are in that danger. You recall the familiar words: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). Notice that the kind of training which exasperates is the antithesis of the Lord’s kind of training. Colossians 3:21 is similar: “Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.” Pastors know the story of indulgent Eli who failed to keep his sons in line and the dire consequences to which his weakness led. They know that the Lord does not want them to be like that. They know specifically that the Lord requires that bishops must maintain control over their children. “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)” (1 Tm 3:4,5). So a pastor needs to avoid the contemporary trend of being a buddy to his children. He is their father and as such must command and if need be demand respect. But there is always the danger that he will draw the bow too taut and become overly strict. This would lead to the exasperation, bitterness and discouragement against which Scripture warns. The result could be that when the children become independent they kick over the traces and lend credence to the myth that preachers’ kids are brats.

III,B,2.

What is to be done? He will give them the Lord’s kind of training and instruction. The Lord is firm in his directives and in his discipline. But he is also kind and loving. “The Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and he punishes (scourges) everyone he accepts as a son” (He 12:6). So a pastor will show his children that he loves them, show it in a way which they can understand. Then they will know that he loves them even when he must spank them, with the result that it is not unusual that a child will turn around and hug his father immediately after a spanking. Luther advised using an apple with the rod, encouraging the child with special acts of kindness and even rewards to learn to find joy in behaving. Thus the Lord encourages obedience to the 4th Commandment with the promise “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth” (Eph 6:3). All of this implies that the pastor will not allow himself to become so preoccupied with his congregational responsibilities that he becomes a veritable stranger to his children. Then his wife will not feel that too much of the responsibility for the training of the children is left to her even though she does spend more time with her children than her husband can. As for the children, their spiritual growth will be promoted.

III,B,3.

Perhaps a word of caution needs to be added. We spoke about commanding respect. This is done by the example which is set before the children in the conduct of the pastor and his spouse. Sincerity and Christian earnestness dare never be only a part of his professional garb. They need to be as evident in the privacy of his home as they are in public. Children must sense that it is never his motto: “Do as I say and not as I do.” One of the main reasons for the turbulence of the 60s is that the younger generation resented the hypocrisy of the establishment and therefore rebelled against its leadership. What happens in our homes ought never to call forth such a reaction. This suggests one further caution. When we get together with our former schoolmates, in recalling the good old times we may also laugh again at some of the pranks which we pulled. That may happen when the children are around. We may not think that they are listening, but “little pitchers have big ears.” They may conclude, “If dad could cut up when he was a kid, why can’t I?” It may be wholesome for us to recall our youthful indiscretions. It may make us a little more patient with our children. If the Lord permitted us to mature and grow into some common sense, he can do it also for our children. But in general they are best served if they do not know about such matters.

III,C,1.

Another problem which our children face is peer pressure. The standards in our homes will be higher than they are in many other homes. Other parents allow their children to do what we do not allow. Then our children may ask, "Why can't I do it? Jimmy's parents let him." This pressure is brought to bear upon them while they are in the grades. It gets to be worse when they are in high school. And it certainly doesn't diminish when they attend college nor, for that matter, when they get out into the world. Peer pressure may be less of a problem in Christian schools on every level, for in general those who attend these schools are from homes in which the same standards prevail as in ours. But we are neither so forgetful or so idealistic as to imagine that in Christian schools there is no peer pressure.

III,C,2

When our children groan under peer pressure, we have an excellent opportunity to promote their spiritual growth. For one thing, we can explain to them why our standards are what they are, showing that we were not arbitrary in setting them but rather listening to the Lord who loves us and whom we love more than life itself. Then we can remind them that Stephen was stoned, James beheaded, Paul afflicted in countless ways. They considered it a privilege to suffer for Jesus' sake. But this was not .the experience of only a few Christians. Jesus meant us and our children too when he said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). We shall let them know that being ridiculed because of their standards and their beliefs is the cross which they are bearing as they follow Jesus. We shall encourage them to look upon patience under their cross as a way of showing Jesus how dear he is to them.

IV. The Family.

Having gathered some thoughts about promoting spiritual growth on the part of the individual members of the family, let's conclude by seeing what might be done by and for the family as a unit. We have already mentioned family devotions.

IV.A.

Experts, genuine or pretended, in the areas of pre- and post-marital counseling, crisis counseling, family ministry, parenting have a lot to say about communication. The trick is to get people to open up, to talk to one another. The counterpart is effective listening. Now Jesus told us: "The people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light" (Lk 16:8). It is wholesome for family life if we do open up to one another. With reservations. I don't think I'm doing anybody a favor if I reveal some of the sinful thoughts which arise in my mind. They need to be squelched, not published. The tragedy is that all too often when we become angry we let another family member know what we are thinking. When we have cooled down we would give a lot if those words could be erased. But it would be wholesome if we occasionally could tear away from today's multitudinous distractions and have a good old-fashioned family visit. Let the children speak up. Make sure that no one laughs at another's comments. Plans, problems, happy experiences all furnish fuel for discussion. If at such times of communication the Word of God is called upon for the last word, communication can promote spiritual growth.

IV.B.

Then there's recreation. The very fact that a pastor's work makes it necessary for him to be away from his family much of the time ought to lead him to budget his time in such a way that there will be spots when he will be with his family. I can cite no specific scriptural support for this assertion except the fact that he is called husband and father, terms which imply association with those to whom he is husband and father. It is hardly proper that the pastor who is husband and father should find time for recreation with his cronies, hunting,

fishing, golf and the like, but not time to devote to recreation with his family. Playing games together, singing together, traveling together, having outings together serves to foster togetherness in the family. Vacations ought to be family affairs as long as that is possible. Children grow up all too fast. Joint recreation will provide opportunities for casual comments about some spiritual truth, for example, about the goodness of our God or some phase of Christian conduct. There need be nothing formal, forced or artificial about these comments. Their very spontaneity will serve to make them effective in fostering the spiritual growth of the pastor and his family.

Conclusion

Spiritual growth is an ideal which the Lord sets before us. "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Pe 2:2,3). "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pe 3:18). "Every branch in me that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful" (Jn 15:2). "We instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more" (1 Th 4:1). Since growth is an ideal which our Lord sets before us, may he help us to recognize and employ every possible opportunity to foster spiritual growth for the pastor and his family.