

## Gentleness in the Pastorate

By John Frame

May 17, 2012

As many of you know, I have for several years been going through I Corinthians in my seminary chapel talks, very slowly. This time, however, I'd like to break away from that series to speak on a topic that I think is rather neglected today in our circles and very important for those in or aspiring to the pastoral office.

That is the subject of *gentleness* in the pastorate. I think we all know that gentleness is one of the fruits of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22. You may know also that it appears again in a similar list of Christian virtues in I Tim. 6:11, virtues specifically of Christian leadership. But gentleness is not usually one of the first qualities we look for in a pastor. In fact, I think that gentleness is one of those Christian virtues that seems to fall through the cracks when we are making evaluations of ourselves and of one another.

Indeed, there has been among us, I think, some confusion about what to do with gentleness. Certainly the old liberal theologians distorted the concept when they used it in effect to eliminate the wrath and judgment of God from their preaching. God, they said, was so gentle, so kind, that he would never punish anyone for sinning against him. Thus they robbed God of his justice; indeed, they replaced the biblical God with a grandfatherly, lenient, and indulgent god out of their own imaginations. Together with this distortion of God was a distortion of Jesus. The liberal Jesus was a kindly soul who hugged babies and patted lambs on the head, but who had within him not a drop of righteous anger or jealousy for the truth.

For the liberal, surely, such a God and such a Christ would not approve of any stern measures to preserve the holiness of his church. In liberal churches formal discipline for doctrinal matters, indeed even for moral transgressions, became a thing of the past.

Evangelicals understandably reacted against that misunderstanding of the divine gentleness. They heaped ridicule and scorn upon the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" of the liberal theologians and set forth Jesus as the risen and ascended Lord of heaven and earth, who would soon return in flaming fire to bring his terrible judgments on the earth. C. S. Lewis's Aslan was, he reminded us, not a *tame* lion. Christ is a "tiger." And so, we have argued, there is a place for formal discipline in the church. Sometimes pastors must be stern, strong, jealous for the righteousness of God. Many Reformed teachers today, fortified by such teaching

as Abraham Kuyper's "life is religion," Van Til's apologetics of antithesis, Jay Adams' nouthetic counseling and the dominion theology of the Christian reconstruction movement, especially emphasize that Christians are not to be wimps. We are not to meekly tolerate the wickedness of our society, but we are to be a true Christian army, putting on the whole armor of God, casting down imaginations, bringing every thought captive to Christ, conquering all human enterprises in the name of King Jesus.

So swings the pendulum, from walk-all-over-me liberalism to dominion militancy. I don't want to turn away from the militancy. I see a lot of value in Kuyper, in Van Til and Adams, indeed in the Christian Reconstruction movement as well. (I don't see quite as much value in it as they do.) But what has happened to gentleness in all of this? Again, we know it is part of the Christian life, and especially that it is one of the qualifications of the Christian pastor. But it slips through the cracks. Ironically, the concept of gentleness seems itself to be very gentle. It doesn't shout out at us; it almost seems to hide among those long lists of Christian virtues.

But let's look more closely at scripture. Look at Exod. 34:6 and 7 where God defines himself, where God explains his name to Moses: "Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." Yes, there is judgment there. Fearsome judgment. But there is also mercy, longsuffering, compassion. As the New Testament says, God *is* love. Sin deserves instantaneous infliction of death; but God is so merciful to us. Here is a God who is gentle with sinners. We learn how gentle when we read in the New Testament that "God commends his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," Rom. 5:8. The Lord Jesus comes as God's gentle shepherd of his people. Remember Isaiah 40:11? "He shall lead his flock like a shepherd. He shall gather the lambs in his arms and carry them close to his heart, and gently lead those who are with young." Yes, our Lord is gentle.

Jesus did not jump all over people who were guilty of sin. To the immoral woman of Samaria, he offered the living water of eternal life. He offered her a wonderful gift, before her sins even entered the conversation. Yes, he did discuss her sins at a later point, but in a very loving, gentle way. He healed people first, and then said "Go and sin no more."

And think of how often Paul emphasizes the importance of gentleness in the ministry. I Thess. 2:6f, "As apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." II Cor. 10:1, "By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you..." Col. 3:12ff, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear

with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." II Tim. 2:24f, "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct [are you listening?], in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

Think of the little book of Philemon, where Paul writes asking his friend to treat well the former slave Onesimus whom Paul is sending back to Philemon. Onesimus is now a Christian brother. Paul says to Philemon that he could, as an apostle, command Philemon to do the right thing, but instead he humbly entreats on the basis of love. Verse 8: "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love." Then verse 14, "I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced." Paul had great authority as an apostle, but as Jesus taught, Paul did not believe a leader should "lord it over" his flock, commanding them to do this and that, threatening them, coercing them, making life miserable for them. Rather, he sought to resolve problems in the gentlest way possible. Like a good parent, he did not want to provoke his children to wrath. Rather, he wanted to teach them, by word and example, how to love the ways of God from the heart. And loving God from the heart involves *spontaneous* obedience. It was important for Paul to cultivate *spontaneous* obedience among his people.

Certainly here there is no disparagement of justice, no compromise of the holiness of the church. Paul did advocate excommunication for those who could not be reached any other way (I Cor. 5), but, characteristically, he saw even excommunication as a means to restore, to heal: "Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord." But Paul's concept of the pastor is certainly a lot less like a king or general than it is like a shepherd, or even a nursing mother.

Another way to put it, perhaps, is that Paul did not see himself as standing in an *adversary* relationship with his people. He was not their enemy, but their friend, their father, their nursing mother. I guess I've been rather saddened by some reports I have heard lately of elders who have taken an adversary stance against their own sheep.

We at Westminster, and in some of the church bodies historically associated with Westminster, need to be warned here in a special way. These institutions were founded by academic theologians, and in these bodies there has always been an atmosphere of academic disputation. There is nothing wrong with that in itself. Academic disputation can be useful and fun. We argue with one another, seek to establish different ideas about this or that, then afterwards we shake hands and go out for coffee or whatever. There is always an adversary relationship in

academic debate, but that is usually temporary, unless the issues discussed have implications far beyond the academy. Theological issues do have such implications, and so even in the seminary there are dangers in academic theological debate. But even at its best, the atmosphere of academic debate falls far short of what God wants for his church. The church is not an academic debating society, not a place where one seeks by whatever means to prove himself right and to prove the other guy wrong. It is above all a place where we care for one another as nursing mothers care for their babies. And if that atmosphere of caring, protecting, nurturing, loving, is ever replaced by an adversary climate, no matter how temporary, the very life of the church is in danger.

Westminster historically has also stood for a tough, militant Christianity which stresses the Lordship of Christ and rejects the wimpish God of theological modernism. We stress the need to preach judgment, to stress those doctrines of scripture like miracles and predestination which are least congenial to modern man. That is all to the good. But it is our task today to determine how all that can be integrated into a church life which is recognizably, atmospherically, loving, nurturing, caring, gentle. If we preach the toughness of God without passionately seeking to maintain that gentleness, we committed an error opposite to that of modernism and one just as bad. Speaking the truth in love— that is the balance God calls us to maintain. Or Gal. 6:1, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him *gently*. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.” Restore, reprove, rebuke; but don’t let the gentleness of Jesus ever be lost. Phil. 4:5, “Let your *gentleness* be evident to all [why gentleness, rather than something else?], the Lord is near.”

What about you? Are you able to nurture others in this way? Maybe you love people, but you don’t know how to correct them in a truly gentle way, without harshness, without hurting. If so, find someone who can serve as a model and teacher for you in this area; it is tremendously important. And, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and for the love of his sheep, stay out of the pastorate until you have learned.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

#### **Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).