

Chapter 4

Love Your Flock

Ted Christman

Dear Timothy,

Warmest greetings in the name of our Savior! It was wonderful to receive your last letter. Dianne and I rejoiced to hear how the Lord is establishing you, not only in the community at large, but especially among your own people. Your increased usefulness to the souls of men is a subject of frequent intercession in our family worship. Be encouraged to know that on some occasions the Lord has so enlarged our hearts concerning your needs that they could only express themselves through tears and brokenness. If only these wandering, distracted, usually too cold hearts could *always* be tender and broken!

Please express our deepest affection to Mary. She is truly a dear wife and faithful companion. We think often of our first years in the ministry and the peculiar challenges they bring to the sometimes lonely wife of a pastor. Please assure her as well of our love and frequent prayers on her behalf.

Timothy, I want to thank you for sharing the brief history of your church. I found it interesting indeed. I am especially grateful for your spiritual assessment of the congregation. I know the endeavor was time consuming, but this is an exercise you actually need to engage in continually. It will help you discern a sense of God's direction for the present and future of your ministry. For my own part, knowing something of the state of your flock helps me considerably in giving you the desired counsel.

You asked me to share some thoughts on loving your flock. I happily consent because your concern is noble and Christ-like. At the same time, I proceed with humility because I am painfully conscious of my own deficiency in loving the sheep as I ought. In fact, I thank both you and the Lord for your request. It has required me to rethink the whole matter of loving our sheep in a way that has been good for my own soul and ministry. May the Lord help me to further enlighten our minds and rekindle the flames of affection in each of our hearts.

What I am about to share with you is the result of some personal brainstorming. I simply sat down with a pad of legal paper and started recording every thought on the subject that came to my mind. Obviously, those thoughts were often random and diverse. Some of them seemed primary, while others were clearly secondary. Sooner than I expected, I had more than a full page of ideas and considerations—all related in some way to loving your flock. Immediately, the challenge became what to do with so many particulars. My approach was to organize them into logical categories and then arrange them in a reasonable order for presentation. I am probably suffering from that common ministerial disease known as *Acute Preacheritis Homileticus*, but you're a pastor and likely have a touch of the same malady. I can only ask that you kindly bear with my outline. At least I haven't added a poem!

In thinking through the general subject of loving your flock, it seemed reasonable for me to raise and answer five questions. Very simply, they are 1. Why is it necessary? 2. How does it look? 3. What must it overcome? 4. Whom should it resemble? 5. Where are its resources?

Love Your Flock—Why Is It Necessary?

Let me begin with the first question, “*Why is it necessary?*” Timothy, I am fully persuaded that you love your sheep. It is evident in what you do for them and even in how you speak of them. Nevertheless, it is good for both of us to think frequently about how we might excel still more in this love. Let me give you a few things to consider.

From the negative perspective, it must be said that if we don’t love our flocks, it is proof positive that God the Father did not give us as shepherds to His flock. Neither was it the ascended Lord Jesus Christ who gave us as a gift to the Church. The Scriptures are very clear on this matter. To His people of the Old Covenant, God said, “I will give you shepherds after My *own heart* who will feed you on knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15). I need not convince you that to have a heart after *God’s* own heart is, among other things, to have a loving heart. The implications of *not* having a loving heart are more than obvious.

Since pastors are Christ’s “gift” to the Church (Ephesians 4:11), it is equally unthinkable that *He* would give undershepherds who do not love His sheep. The same Savior who loved His own to the uttermost (John 13:1) implants a portion of His spiritual DNA into the heart of every true pastor.

Moreover, if we don’t love our flocks, we will be utterly unable to perform any of our responsibilities *for the right motive*. All that we do will be perfunctory—the mechanical labors of a mere professional. I am sure you have already learned in your brief pastorate that preparing well-studied sermons, preaching with earnestness and passion, interceding fervently for each of your sheep, exercising genuine oversight to the members, giving wise and courageous leadership to the deacons and congregation, etc. is extremely hard and wearisome work! What must those same labors be for the minister who possesses no real God-given love for his people? Surely, his work is mundane to say the least, and destined to become downright irksome. This is perhaps one of the primary reasons many pastors experience burnout, resign the ministry and end up selling life insurance.

Positively speaking, however, possessing just a modicum of God’s heart spontaneously energizes and motivates the undershepherd to carry out his pastoral responsibilities. Loving his sheep, he longs to help them understand the faith-increasing, sanctifying, guiding, comforting, life-transforming Word of God. Therefore, he studies *laboriously* to prepare his sermons and delivers them with a measure of earnestness and passion.

Loving his sheep and longing for their growth in grace as well as their peace and joy in the Lord, the pastor fervently carries their names into the holy place on the breastplate of his priestly intercession. There, he pours out his heart on their behalf. He can do no other.

The loving shepherd also makes sure that he knows the state of their souls by visiting their homes and inquiring as to their spiritual health. He loves them too much to converse in vague generalities. He finds himself compelled to ask the difficult questions—the potentially embarrassing ones. He longs to know about such things as the regularity of their devotions, their progress in grace and the intimacy of their walk with God. He is deeply interested in their family worship, the state of their marriage and whether or not they are benefiting from the public means of grace. He desires to know how he may better pray for them. However, these practical concerns are not merely for the *flock* as a whole. They also pertain to *each* of the sheep individually, including the often neglected singles who grapple with their own unique challenges. Timothy, be sure of it. This kind of interest must be deeply rooted in the soil of love.

A loving pastor also understands how important it is that his sheep are *persuaded* of his love for them. This will enable them to more quickly heed his exhortations publicly and privately. J.C. Ryle said, “Once become satisfied that a man loves you, and you will listen gladly to anything he has to say.”¹ Richard Baxter put it like this, “When the people see that you love them without pretense, then they will hear anything you tell them and they will bear anything you lay upon them.”² This persuasion of their pastor’s love will also enable the congregation to more sweetly submit to his leadership. They know their pastor loves them. They know he only has their good in view. My dear brother, frequently affirm your love to your people publicly and privately, not only by your faithful and courageous ministries, but also by your affectionate words. Often, they should see you look into their faces and hear you say, “I truly love you in Christ. I am so thankful you’re a part of this congregation.”

Love Your Flock—How Does It Look?

My second inquiry is, “*How does it look?*” To some extent, I have already answered this question. In seeking to demonstrate how love motivates and energizes our ministerial labors, I made reference to diligent sermon preparation, passionate preaching, fervent intercession, careful oversight and courageous leadership. Where these elements are lacking, there can be no *real* love for the flock. On the other hand, it is evident that where there is such love, it will manifest itself through those very responsibilities. In other words, the portrait of a loving shepherd must always be painted with the brilliant colors of diligence, passion, fervency, carefulness and courage.

¹ Bishop J.C. Ryle, *The Christian Leaders of England in the 18th Century*, Popular Edition (1902), 55.

² Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Grand Rapids, Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971), 32.

There are additional, attractive hues which must likewise contribute to the captivating portrait of a loving shepherd. They pertain not so much to his ministerial functions as to his posture and demeanor—the way he carries himself and relates to his sheep. These primary colors are *humility* and *warmth*.

To truly love our flocks in a Christ-like way, we must be men of genuine humility, “gentle and *humble* in heart” (Matthew 11:29). Among other things, the grace of humility will make us approachable. Our dear Savior was always accessible. Teachers in Israel like Nicodemus, proud Pharisees like Simon, tax gatherers and sinners, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, even little children all found the Lord to be inviting and approachable. How sad it is that so many parishioners are apprehensive to seek an audience with their minister! In some cases it is due to their own timidity and social awkwardness, but all too often the reticence is grounded in a perceived aloofness in their pastor. *He's hard to talk to. It seems like he's just too busy to be spending time with me. He makes me feel that he has bigger fish than me to fry. I feel that his mind isn't really focused on me.* These are foreboding and discouraging conclusions no member of the congregation should ever have to draw. On the subject of church members visiting with their pastor, John Stott simply says, “The more they speak to him in his study on weekdays, the better he will speak to them from the pulpit on Sundays.”³

Referring to pastors who project a kind of sanctified superiority, Spurgeon once said to his college students, “That is the article I am deprecating, that dreadful ministerial starch. If you have indulged in it, I would earnestly advise you to go and ‘wash in Jordan seven times’, and get it out of you, every particle of it.”⁴ In the same lecture, the famous London pastor went on to say, “Fling away your stilts brethren, and walk on your feet; doff [cast aside] your ecclesiasticism, and array yourselves in truth.”⁵

These beautiful virtues of humility, meekness and approachability ought to *especially* shine when our sheep occasionally come to advise or even correct us. Brother, a truly loving pastor is able to acknowledge before his sheep that he was wrong, perhaps that he has sinned. Even though our Chief Shepherd was never wrong or sinful, for us to be like Him in humility, we *must* be able to be constructively criticized. In the long run, we earn far more confidence from our people in being able to humble ourselves before them than in always insisting we are right. Many times we have admired the courage of Priscilla and Aquila for taking Apollos aside in order to explain to him “the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). How often do we esteem the eloquent preacher for being meek enough to be sharpened by a couple of laypeople?

Another virtue essential to the Christ-like pastor is *warmth*. Loving our sheep requires us to always project and display a genuine tenderness and priestly sympathy. They must know and feel when they unburden their souls (whether it be in the confession of serious sin, the admission of spiritual coldness, the revelation of a rocky marriage or

³ John R.W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait* (Grand Rapids, Erdmans, 1961), 88.

⁴ C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students* (Grand Rapids, Assoc. Publishers and Authors, 1971), 181.

⁵ Ibid.

the anguishing report of the death of a loved one) that the one to whom they come for help and guidance genuinely cares. They must also feel the same interest if they come to share the happy news of an engagement or pregnancy.

Timothy, let me reiterate. Your sheep must *know* and *feel* beyond any shadow of doubt that you are gentle, tender, kind, friendly, interested, focused and warm. If they doubt the reality of these virtues, they will inevitably doubt your love. If they doubt your love, your ministerial effectiveness will be virtually paralyzed.

As I conclude the answer to my second question, listen one more time to the counsel of Charles Spurgeon. He said,

A man must have a great heart if he would have a great congregation. When a man has a large, loving heart, men go to him as ships to a haven, and feel at peace when they have anchored under the lee of his friendship. Such a man is hearty in private as well as in public; his blood is not cold and fishy, but he is as warm as your own fireside.⁶

Love Your Flock—What Must It Overcome?

I come now to my third question, “*What must it overcome?*” Before I begin to answer, perhaps I should seek your forgiveness for writing such a long letter. I failed to tell you that I am also suffering from that dreaded disease called *Acute Preacheritis Expandicus*. I will attempt to be briefer and more concise.

As you have probably discovered, loving your flock is not always easy. At times it can be very difficult. This is a phenomenon we need to understand. The more aware we are of the dynamics which oppose a selfless, pastoral love, the better we will succeed in overcoming them.

It seems to me there are enemies from within and without which rise up in opposition to the kind of pastoral love we need to possess. Those “guerilla forces” *within* are rooted in our remaining sin—partiality, selfishness, slothfulness, pride, etc. You can imagine how our sinfulness manifests itself. The scenarios are virtually limitless! A hard day’s work has come to an end. You and Mary have planned an evening out, a little getaway. The babysitter for your son is all lined up. Everything looks good to go, and then the phone rings. Timothy, you can finish the story. It could be a marriage problem or literally a hundred other issues. The bottom line is that in many cases the matter is sufficiently serious for you to *lovingly* set your plans aside and minister to the bleating sheep. It is Christ-like love *alone* which prevents resentment, conquers the flesh and tenderly makes the sacrifice. Time and space will not allow me to comment on the way laziness, weariness, discouragement, resentment, pride and superficiality also launch their destructive grenades. All I can say, brother, is that we must *constantly* do battle with these and other residual sins which seek to capture and imprison our love.

⁶ Ibid., 183,184.

Then there are the enemies from *without*—the potential tyranny of administrative responsibilities, the hectic pace of life, unexpected interruptions, etc. Add to these opposing forces those difficult, trying, unappreciative, criticizing, impatient, high-maintenance sheep who seem to require so much of our precious time. We try to cope with the demanding circumstances of life by prioritizing our duties and managing our time better, but these inevitable distractions still get in the way and hinder the love we long to express. The more difficult challenge is, “How do you love the *unlovely*?” God has wisely placed some of them in every congregation. Though they are wearisome and sometimes frustrating to us, they are precious to the Savior. They are the MOG’s of our flock—those “means of grace” intended to make *us* more godly. Perhaps you’ve heard the little saying, *To live above with saints we love...oh that will be glory! To live below with saints we know... now that’s a different story!* Loving such sheep can only be done through the kind of love our Shepherd possesses for us. For such strength we must go to the strong! This thought provides a natural segue to my fourth question.

Love Your Flock—Whom Should It Resemble?

When we think about the *quality* of pastoral love we desire, the natural question is raised, “Whom should it resemble?” Thankfully, we need not look long for the answer. The *ultimate* example of perfect pastoral love is clearly and indisputably the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul spoke repeatedly of the love of Christ. In Ephesians 3:19 he described it as that which “surpasses knowledge.” Perhaps the central and most awe-inspiring feature of this incomprehensible love is its *self-giving*. In that same epistle to the Ephesians, the apostle went on to say, “Christ also loved the church and *gave Himself* up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). In Galatians 2:20, Paul spoke in affectionately personal terms. He said, “The Son of God, who loved me and *delivered Himself* up for me.” Referring to His own *goodness* as a shepherd, the Lord Jesus said, “The good shepherd *lays down His life* for the sheep” (John 10:11). Again, when reflecting on the quality of His love, the Savior plainly asserted, “Greater love has no one than this, that one *lay down his life* for his friends” (John 15:13).

Dear brother, if the most Christ-like thing a husband can do for his wife is to give himself up for her, then surely the most Christ-like thing we can do for our sheep is to give ourselves up for them. The love we need to emulate is essentially about sacrifice. The consummate “lover” is our precious Savior. As we pursue our ministries and strive for increased conformity to Him, “beholding as in a mirror” the glory of our Lord, we *will* be “transformed into the same image” (II Corinthians 3:18). We will look more like *Him* and our love will look more like *His*. If through God’s kindness our ministries are lengthy, we will find a thousand ways to lay our lives down for the flock, often to the point of exhaustion, until the very day of our death.

Another critical virtue exemplified in our Lord's character is *patience*. Every time I read through the Gospels, I am overwhelmed with how graciously He endured the unbelief, ignorance, dullness, ingratitude and pride of His disciples. On one occasion He had to say to the twelve, "Have I been *so long* with you, and yet you have not come to know Me?" (John 14:9). On another occasion He said, "O foolish men and *slow of heart to believe*" (Luke 24:25). Frequently, we hear Him tenderly lament, "O you of little faith" (Matthew 14:31). On the very eve of His crucifixion, when His heart was heavy with the prospect of divine abandonment, His weak, unbelieving, dull-of-heart disciples actually entered into an argument "as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest" (Luke 22:24). How did the One whom we should resemble respond? *Always, always, always* with the gentleness and self-composure of patience. Timothy, our disciples are no different than the Lord's. They, like their pastors, also struggle with unbelief, ignorance, dullness, ingratitude and pride. Our duty is to help them out of these sins with a patient and longsuffering love that resembles the Savior.

Love Your Flock—Where Are Its Resources?

Dear brother, I come now to my last question, "*Where are its resources?*" When you consider the necessity of loving your flock, how it looks, what it must overcome and whom it should resemble, surely you join me in feeling overwhelmed. Upon contemplating such matters, we find ourselves spontaneously crying out with the Apostle Paul, "Who is adequate for these things?" (II Corinthians 2:16). Of course, the answer is "No one!" However, the same apostle, only a few verses later, points us to our true hope. He says, "Our adequacy is from God" (II Corinthians 3:5). The responsibility to love our sheep in a way that is truly pleasing to the Lord is momentous. Sometimes it even seems impossible. The encouraging fact remains that *all* of the resources for such a difficult assignment are readily available. They are to be found in the triune God of Scripture. We simply must flee to His Word and throne.

With regard to His Word, we should continually search its sacred pages for direction and guidance as to *how* we should love the flock. Therein we find for our instruction an abundance of precepts, principles and examples, especially in the words and works of the Savior. The life and ministry of the Apostle Paul is also pregnant with helpful counsel. The book of Acts and the Epistles reveal much about the heart of a loving shepherd. Concerning God's moral precepts it has been said, "Law is love's eyes, without it, love is blind." The same is true for pastoral love. Without the eyes of Scripture, its love is blind. You and I have no right to love Christ's sheep the way *we* think they should be loved. We are responsible to love them the way the Chief Shepherd requires.

In addition to bowing before His Word, we must also continually bow in prayer before His throne. There we may take up the prosperous occupation of begging. As you well know, in the Kingdom of God, beggars become rich.

Timothy, I previously spoke of the triune God. Here is what I had in mind. God the *Father* gives shepherds after His own heart (Jeremiah 3:15). The exalted *Son* of God gives pastors to the Church (Ephesians 4:11). God the *Holy Spirit* makes “overseers” (Acts 20:28). We simply need to fall before the gracious throne of this God and plead with the respective Persons of the Trinity to mold us into all that we need to be. He who gives and makes true pastors is able to make them *better* pastors—i.e. more loving. Before His Throne of Grace we ought often to present holy arguments. We should plead, “Oh God, I want a heart more like Yours so that I may better love *Your* sheep. I’m asking You to make me like Yourself! How can You decline my request?” Surely the Lord would be pleased with such prayers! Surely He will answer such prayers! John Piper graphically describes prayer as “the coupling of primary and secondary causes.” He goes on to characterize it as “the splicing of our limp wire to the lightning bolt of heaven.”⁷ With a resource of such infinite power, may we find ourselves fervently and frequently begging for such grace.

Brother, I thank you for your patience in reading this longer than normal letter. I readily acknowledge that I have only scratched the surface. I am also painfully aware of my own failure to love my sheep as I ought. This sin of omission is a matter of frequent confession on my part. As I conclude, Timothy, please remember to Whom our sheep belong. I say “our sheep,” but in reality they are *not* ours. They belong to the One Whom we are privileged to serve—the Chief Shepherd. This is just one more sobering reason why we must *never, ever* approach “lording it over” them (I Peter 5:3). Rather, with all of the God-like love we can acquire, we must imitate the Lord of Whom it is said, “Like a shepherd He will tend His flock. In His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom. He will gently lead the nursing ewes” (Isaiah 40:11).

May the Lord graciously and abundantly pour into our unworthy souls ever-increasing measures of His own love for the sheep. Please covenant with me to petition God for more of this wonderful gift. Timothy, if you are able to receive one brief and final exhortation from a spiritual father, humbly receive this one. *Love Your Flock!* Baxter says, “See that you feel a tender love in your breasts, and let the people feel it in your speeches and see it in your dealings. Let them see that you are willing to spend and be spent for their sakes.”⁸

Having accomplished the main purpose of my letter, I pass on some pleasant news. My dear and valuable wife Dianne is doing very well. Can you believe she has “endured” and helped this unworthy husband for thirty-one years? Our precious daughter Rebekah is now twenty-four years old and longs wholeheartedly to serve the Lord wherever He places her. Jonathan is twenty-two and recently graduated from college. By God’s grace he is a young man who gives encouraging evidence of being called to the Christian ministry. If the Lord is willing, he will begin seminary in the Fall.

⁷ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville, Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002), 58.

⁸ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Grand Rapids, Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971), 32.

Give our warmest regards to Mary and assure her of our prayers for a good pregnancy and the safe delivery of another healthy child. As you give us occasional updates, we will continue to intercede for the Lord's blessing on your church. I humbly ask that you remember the ministry of Heritage in the same way. Until we correspond again, "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance on you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24-26).

Sincerely your fellow servant in the Gospel,

Pastor Ted

P.S. You asked about books that might be helpful on the subject of loving your flock. I highly recommend these titles:

Lectures To My Students by C. H. Spurgeon

The Reformed Pastor by Richard Baxter

The Preacher's Portrait by John R. W. Stott