



## Chapter 4



# A Ministry—Balanced Church

### THE GREAT COMMISSION: THE GREAT CHARACTER

The headwaters of the Mississippi River in Minnesota's Itasca State Park have been the starting point of long canoe trips for many adventures. My family and I camped at this beautiful site years ago. I recall how thrilled we were to step from rock to rock over the narrow beginnings of one of the two greatest rivers in the western hemisphere. After leaving Lake Itasca, the mighty Mississippi wends its way 2,000 miles to the Gulf of Mexico.

The other great river—the Amazon—is in South America. These two prominent streams have something in common: they become part of a far greater body of water, the Atlantic Ocean.

Two great streams of another nature flow through the New Testament, joining their waters in the greater ocean of God's love. One stream is the great Commission, the mandate of our Lord to go make disciples of all nations (see Matt. 28:19,20). The other may not sound as familiar. It is the Greater Charter, the mandate of our Lord to take care of His sheep (see John 21:16). The one calls for the Church to make disciples; the other, to care for those disciples.

The church in which the Lay Pastors Ministry can happen will strive to equalize these two streams. On the one hand, they will deploy those gifted and called to make disciples in ministries designed for mission and evangelism. On the other hand, they will deploy those gifted and called to care for Christ's followers in ministries designed for pastoral care. Neither is done at the neglect of the other: not "either-or," but "both-and." Balance is the key.

I believe God raised up the Lay Pastors Ministry to help fulfill the Great Charter. There is no thought of disparaging the Great Commission (much of my won ministry energy), but because Scripture places such a heavy emphasis on lay pastoral care, my emphasis is on the one stream I call the Great Charter.

History records the Magna Carta—meaning the Great charter—as a constitution guaranteeing fundamental personal and other rights, wrested from King John by the

English barons on June 15, 1215. I call 1 Peter 5:1-4 the Magna Carta of the Lay Pastors Ministry because this model of congregational care guarantees the fundamental personal right of every church members to pastoral care:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (NIV)

The flow of the Great Commission through the New Testament is well known. To its credit, the Church has plied these waters with great success for the past three centuries, the Great Chapter is not well known. I invite you to accompany me through the New testament for the grand experience of exploring these less familiar waters.

We begin at the headwaters. Three bubbling springs feed this great flow of pastoral care:

- Jesus' mandate: A new commandment I give you [My disciples]: *Love one another*" (John 13:34)
- Jesus's prayer: "I pray for *them* [My disciples]. I am not praying for the world, but for those *you have given me*" (17:9)
- Jesus' charge: "*Take care of my sheep*" (21:16).

The italics, of course, are mine. They make it obvious that Jesus places great importance on caring for those who are already His. A misinterpretation of this selective attention risks Christian elitism. It comes dangerously close to claiming that only Christians matter to God.

This thinking, of course, is ridiculous. After all, Jesus' earlier call to Peter to make disciples—"Follow me and I will make you [a fisher] of men" (Matt.4:19)—predates this call to take care of His sheep. He struck a balance between the two ministries.

The elitist risk wakes us up! It opens our eyes to the fact that when people come to Christ and join our churches, they have a right to be loved, heard, nurtured, prayed for and encouraged. They have a right to pastoral care. The Great Charter guarantees this right.

We now journey downstream to Acts. The caring dynamics was given a practical spin when the apostles chose seven people to take responsibility—not for all people in the community, but for the widows in their church (see Acts 6:1-7). 12:4-8 are Moving on, we hear Paul instructing the elders of the Ephesians church: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made your overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God" (20:28). He made no reference to making more

disciples.

Next, we said through Romans. Again, as though the world did not matter, the Church is seen as a Body that includes only Christians—"each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:5). It is a closed fellowship. The seven gifts listed in Romans are all intended to be used within the Body. This is followed by, "Be devoted to *one another* in brotherly love" (v.10, italics mine). Sound exclusive, doesn't it?

On down the river—the 14 spiritual gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12 are for those who confess, "Jesus is Lord" (v.3), and are to be used within the Church. In Galatians 6, the apostle asks for the preferential treatment of believers, "let us do good to all people, *especially to those who belong to the family of believers*" (v. 10, italics mine).

The waters widen in Ephesians 4, calling pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service. For what purpose? Evangelism? Missions? Making disciples? Not at this time. The purpose is to build up the Body of Christ, promote unity and further the maturity of the saints.

Like the Mississippi River at Lake Pinen on the Minnesota-wisconsin border, the stream through the New Testament widens at 1 Peter 5:1-4. Peter, who was called by Jesus first to fish for people and later to take care of His sheep, appeals to the elders of five Roman provinces to do what? Make disciples? Not at this time. His appeal is that they shepherd God's flock. Have we explored this stream sufficiently to make the point?

If a person were to read only the parts of the New Testament calling Christians to love one another, to tend the flock, to shepherd God's people and to give preferential treatment to Christians, he or she would think that the Church's energies are to be consumed only on itself at the exclusion of those outside the Church. It would appear that the Great Charter is the only mission of the Church.

Conversely, if a person were to read only the parts of the New Testament calling Christians to make disciples of all nations, to evangelize and seek the lost (as in Jesus' parable of the one lost sheep in Luke 15), he or she would believe that the Church's energies are to be consumed only on those outside of the fold. It would appear that *the Great Commission* is the only mission of the Church.

To avoid this "either/or" absurdity, we must accept the whole counsel of God and believe that both are absolute imperative for Christ's Church. Every Christian is to be committed to both. However, no one can be productively engaged in both at the same time. It is not humanly possible for any one person to give himself or herself concurrently to both of these demanding, all-consuming ministries.

God knows this, therefore, He gives a variety of gifts and calls, each Christian to a chosen ministry. The idea is: support both; do one. Paraphrasing Romans 12:6-8 illumines this:

If a man's gift is *making disciples*, let him use it in proportion to his faith; if it is *pastoring*, let him care for God's people diligently.

God gives for one stream to some people, and gifts for the other stream to other people. His plan for keeping a balance between the two and getting both done is to mobilize the *laos*—all the people of God—to assist them in discovering their ministries, to equip them, to commission them and to release them to do what God has called them to do. It takes all the people of God to do all the work of God.

The idea of the Great Charter is new to many churches. For example, my vocation travels took me through a city in which a church famous for its evangelism program was located. On the spur of the moment I stopped in, but I was able to visit with his secretary. As I inquired about their program for pastoral care, hoping to pick up some ideas for my

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own ministry, she became tearful. She began to pour her heart out as she told me a story she had needed to tell somebody for a long time.

In order to pastorally care for the hundreds of people who were joining the church as the result of their effective evangelism programs, only one person was ministering. It was her boss, and he was burning out. Consequently, people were not only joining the church, but they were also leaving it.

The church was remarkably successful in evangelism, recruiting hundreds of people to visit in homes, share the gospel and assist people in making their decision to receive Christ and join the church. Without question God had given hundreds of other members of the church pastoral gifts, but because of the Great Commission dominated, the Great Charter didn't have a chance. The result was that the back door of the church, as they say, was nearly as busy as the front to door. The two mighty ministries of the church were woefully out of balance.

The apostle Paul brought these two into balance in his ministry. But in the Church as I know it, we don't hear about his pastoral work. His fame as an evangelist and church planter overshadows what I call his "second ministry." His first ministry, of course, was preaching the gospel to those who had never heard it. His second ministry (second, not in importance, but in sequence) was caring for those who became believers. Pastoring follows evangelism in the spiritual order just as nurturing follows birth in the biological order.

Paul followed his evangelism with pastoral care. He established churches wherein people could be nurtured and cared for and he then kept in close touch with them. He did this by visiting and writing. His first venture into caring for his converts may have been his recommendation

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to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers [and sisters] in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing" (Acts 15:36).

Even though Paul and Barnabas split over a disagreement about a third traveling companion, the record shows that Paul, accompanied now by Silas, "went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (v. 41). He was bringing the Great Charter into balance with the Great Commission.

Acts 20, as we discovered previously, tells of Paul's visit with the elders of the Church in Ephesus. His single focus was on caring for the people:

- Keep watch over all the flock;
- The Holy Spirit has made you overseers;
- Be shepherds of the Church of God; and
- Help the weak

Not a word is mentioned about making additional disciples. His strategy must have been that only a nurtured and cared for church will be strong enough to continue making new disciples. Visiting people was one way he cared for them.

Paul also pastored by writing. He exposed his soul to the Church in Philippi by telling them he remembered them and prayed for them (see Phil. 1:4). He assured them that he had them in his heart (see 1:7). He counseled the church in Colossae to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, forgiveness and love. Giving counsel is a pastoral act.

To the Thessalonians Paul revealed is love. Not only did he share the gospel with the Thessalonians, he also hared his very life because "they became so dear to him" (1 Thess. 2:8). What a pastor! What care! Finally, a pastoral benediction: "May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you" (2 Thess. 3:16). Notice that these words are addressed exclusively to Christians and do not contain any reference to witnessing or evangelizing.

The record of Paul's pastoring initiatives makes our case for the Great charter. Paul accepted responsibility for the care of the people who had become Christians through his preaching.

Tom Parrish one of a growing number of second Reformation pastors striking a balance between the Great Commission and the Gret Charter. Tom is senior pastor of the Vision of Glory Lutheran Church in Plymouth, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis.

In the final chapter of my book, *Can the Pastor Do It Alone?*, Tom Parrish told his story of starting the Lay Pastors ministry in his first pastorate, Bethel Lutheran Church, Bellbrook, ohio.

The church was experiencing significant growth for a "small" church. Tom's concern for the pastoral care of former and new members alike compelled him to implement the Lay Pastors Ministry. I had the privilege of equipping the church's first lay pastors. It flourished and met the need.

His call to be the senior pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Minnehaha Falls, Minneapolis, Minnesota, left Bethel without vocational pastoral leadership for 18 months. The volunteer pastors did the pastoral care of the congregation. Fourteen years and three pastors later, laypeople are continuing to provide pastoral care.

Shortly after arriving at Trinity, Tom began laying foundation for what proved to be an effectively lay pastoral care ministry.

Tom is now pastor of Vision of Glory Church. As the spiritual leader of the congregation, he is leading his people on two parallel tracks: rapid membership growth and pastoral care. They are presently planning a new building to accommodate the growth and will soon hold their first lay pastors training seminar. They are seriously and equally committed to both the Great Commission and the Great Charter.

Hear Tom's testimony about his three-church experience with one of the two parallel tracks, pastoral care: "After 18 years of ordained ministry I do not know of any other approach to congregational care that comes close to the effectiveness, efficiency and fulfillment of the priesthood of all believers than the Lay Pastors Ministry."

Let's reflect again on the imagery of the two mighty rivers. Both water are joined as one in the great Atlantic Ocean, just as the two mighty rivers of the New Testament—the *Great Commission* and the *Great Charter*—are joined as one in the ocean of God's great love.

A more apt metaphor at this point may be the two great mountains on the island of Hawaii, Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea. I saw them daily for the seven years I was the pastor of Haili Church in Hilo. They appear to be two separate 14,000-foot formations. They are separate; their peaks are many miles apart. But they are also joined together as one, rising to their lofty heights from a common base, the whole island of Hawaii.

In the same way, the Great Commission and the Great Charter, though they are two separate ministries, rise to their lofty heights from a common source: the massive love of God—love for the world and love for His people. That God has joined together, the Church ought not to put asunder.

But the Church is splitting the Great Commission and the Great Charter. Some churches are majoring in one and some in the other, not realizing that both are equally called for by God. Others are ineffective in doing both. The reality is that great numbers of churches are not honoring the Great Charter. And they never will be able to honor it as long as The Pastor is the only pastor in the congregation.

But when pastorally-gifted laypeople are affirmed, equipped and given the ministry, the Greater Charter will be honored. All of God's people will then have pastoral care. Bring your church into balance.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Do both the Great commission and the Great Charter.