

Acts 18:3

# TENTMAKERS

## CUPS THAT RUN OVER

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want (Ps. 23:1 1).

This is one of the first Bible verses we teach our children. We want them to learn that God will sustain them. He is their shepherd, their protector. When the wolves get too close, He will chase them away or destroy them.

Basic to the office of shepherd is the ability to preserve life. This means the ability to provide economic resources. "I shall not want" follows "the Lord is my shepherd." Because God's people are under the protection of the heavenly Shepherd, they are also under His care. If men acknowledge their position as sheep, they can benefit from the Shepherd's protection.

The word "pastor" derives from the same root as "pastoral." A pastor is the shepherd of a congregation. "Feed my sheep," Jesus instructed Peter three times (John 21:15-17). As the perfect Pastor, Jesus was assigning this same role to His follower, Peter. He transferred authority to Peter to serve in this same office. The sheep need protection; the pastor is to provide it.

### Pastoral Guidance

It is generally understood that Jesus assigned His disciples the task of providing spiritual guidance to the thousands of new converts who began streaming into the church after the day of Pentecost. This guidance is necessary to preserve the church during all periods, for there are always spiritual wolves seeking to devour sheep. The devil himself is described as a roaring lion, seeking to devour whom he may (1 Peter 5:8). Pastors are supposed to defend the flock — the congregation — against supernatural forces.

Is the pastor to serve as a magician, or a kind of spiritual good luck charm? Is he a kind of rabbit's foot for the congregation? Is it "supernatural display vs. supernatural display," with the best pastors possessing the greatest power? No. The spiritual battle is ethical, not metaphysical. In Elijah's day, the Hebrews needed a display "spiritual fireworks," and Elijah gave them this on Mt. Carmel. But this fireworks display did not produce long-term ethical commitment on the part of the nation of Israel. With the spiritual development of the New Testament church, the ethical nature of the conflict between Christ's people and Satan's has become more pronounced. The occasional display of power, such as the healing ministry of oil by the elders (James 5:14), is subordinate to the overall ethical confrontation,

Nevertheless, we still teach our children the 23rd psalm. This psalm does not refer to ethics alone; it presents a display of God's power to protect His people, to reward them in the presence of their enemies, to anoint them with oil (v. 5). The presence of oil testified to the ethical integrity of the anointed person (v. 3), but also to his psychological strength (v. 4). In the

Hebrew commonwealth, to be anointed was to be placed by God in a position of authority. This display of God's favor was visible — not merely visible to the faithful, but visible to the enemies of the faithful. In other words, ethical righteousness produced external consequences.

Are we to argue today that the 23rd psalm no longer is relevant, except as a spiritual exercise? Our children certainly are not so naive (or hermeneutically sophisticated) to understand it this way. The psalm promises benefits, and our children gain confidence in the God of Scripture through memorizing it.

If the ordained elder is a pastor whose office is modeled after Christ's role as supreme Pastor, then he has a personal obligation before God to serve as the protector of his flock. The congregation is not supposed to protect him; he is supposed to protect them. What, then, is the nature of the protection he is to supply?

### What Kind of Protection?

The 23rd psalm presents a picture of success. God offers His people safety, self-confidence under Him, and visible victory. He puts their enemies under their visible authority. As His representatives, they are to place Satan's earthly army under their feet, even as God places Christ's enemies under His son's feet (1 Cor. 15:25). This messianic footstool and dominion motif was referred to by David (Ps. 110:1), and Jesus cited this reference in His final verbal confrontation with the religious leaders of Israel (Matt. 22:41-46). After that exchange, no one asked Him any more trick questions (v. 46). His answers to these "leading" questions kept presenting Him as the archetypal Leader.

The imagery of the shepherd points to physical protection. Transferred to the office of pastor, the convenient interpretation is a man giving spiritual counsel to the flock. But the shepherd is more than a counsellor to his sheep; if they get out of line, he sits the sheep dog on them. He is able to protect and guide them because he can control them. A pastor without a rod and staff is not much of a pastor. The rod and staff are used against wolves who invade the sheepfold and against sheep who try to wander out of it. A sheep who gets loose is unprotected; he is at the mercy of the wolves. Sheep must be disciplined if they are to be kept from the slaughter. The spiritual imagery is incorrect, but it must be consistently applied. Spiritual guidance involves restraints as well as reinforcement.

Another aspect of the pastoral office is economic. The Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 rewards His loyal follower. This must not be spiritualized or internalized away until nothing is left of God's blessings except the vapors of ecstasy. The rewards are visible. A man's enemy does not see only a happy sheep; he sees a fat sheep. The enemies of Christ and His people are not simply to retreat to the sound of men shouting incoherently or the sight of men rolling ecstatically in the aisles. The

enemies of God perceive such behavior as mindless—a curse, not a blessing; an escape from the world for failures, not a manifestation of dominion. No, they are supposed to see successful people who have a grip on their emotions and a handle on the world. They are supposed to see themselves as the cultural footstools of a God-honoring people, so as to prepare them for the wrath to come, that they might repent.

Thus, pastors have a responsibility to train up successful people. They are to provide teaching from the pulpit that leads to external, visible, debt-free success for most of the members of their congregations, or at least for the sons and grandsons of the congregation. Like Moses in the wilderness, the shepherds of today are to prepare men for dominion. If the older ones refuse to learn, then the younger ones may. This is why an uncompromising advocacy of Christian education is essential for every preaching ministry. Any pastor who does not return continually to the theme of parents' responsibility to provide God-honoring education for their children has compromised his position as a shepherd.

If men are not to "want" when they are under the care of the heavenly Shepherd, then the earthly shepherd must take care to preach biblical ethical principles that produce economic benefits for the society which adheres to these principles. The gospel of salvation is not to produce long-term contraction and defeat for the people of God. It is not Jesus Christ, through His people, who is to become Satan's footstool. Satan does not present Christ and His people with an earnest (down payment) on their coming eternal defeat. On the contrary, it is Satan and his legions who are to suffer permanent external setbacks, in time and on earth.

#### A Legacy of Conquest

Where are the Roman legions? In the dust. Where are the heirs of the emperors who once persecuted the church? In Italy, waiting for yet another coalition government to rise and fall within the fiscal year. Where are the czars, the kings and the aristocrats who resisted the spread of Christian orthodoxy? There are but five kings left on earth, as King Farouk once said: the King of England, and the kings of hearts, clubs, spades, and diamonds.

The church remains. Not the same church organizationally down through the ages, but the church nonetheless. The gospel of Jesus Christ is still preached every Sunday around the world. The "Genius of the Emperor" is long forgotten, though early Christians were executed for refusing to affirm it. The traditional Paganism of backward nations is in retreat wherever the church, or the church's prodigal son, Western civilization, has taken hold. But that prodigal culture will return home when the fruits of unrighteousness lead to visible bankruptcy

and life in the pigsty (Luke 15:1-32).

Unfortunately, there are professional rejecters of Western civilization inside the house of the Father who will resent the return of the prodigal son, just as the elder brother in Christ's parable resented the return of his brother. The younger brother was to have perished because of his wicked ways, and besides he had so much fun whooping it up in the far country. It just isn't fair that he should get back in the good graces of the Father. Will Christians partake legitimately and gleefully of the fruits of capitalism? Ascetic fundamentalists and simple life communalists are equally shocked at this prospect. Not large homes and fast cars and cheap computers and satellite communications! Not comprehensive responsibility for the fundamental decisions of an entire civilization! Anything but that! No, far better to hide in the historical shadows until the day of judgment, or at least until the Rapture.

For almost two thousand years, Christian pastors have preached the gospel, and where that comprehensive gospel has been consistently and faithfully preached, there has been progress. The faithful have sat in the presence of their enemies, with precious oil running over their heads. The envy-driven enemies of God have cried out in rage: Marxists, socialists, fabians, social gospel theologians, Liberation theologians, and third world tribal tyrants dressed in field marshal regalia or custom tailored suits. "Unfair, unfair!" they cry. "The wealthy have used the poor as footstools. Exploitation!"

Footstools, yes. Exploited, no. The principles of righteous living have consequences, in time and on earth. So do the principles of unrighteousness. The wealthy, like the poor, we always have with us. The question is: How did the wealthy get that way? It is not wealth as such which should concern us; it is the way to wealth that is the proper focus of concern. It is not the footstool condition of ethical rebels which should bother our consciences; it is the socialistic political ideology and welfare State institutions that reward failure and tax productivity that should be the object of our wrath.

#### Conclusion

What we need is preaching which emphasizes the avenue of success: God's comprehensive law-order. What we need is pastoral guidance which is grounded in the whole counsel of God. What we need, in short, is an understanding of the 23rd psalm which is closer to what is understood by children who memorize it, and farther removed from theologians who are embarrassed by its "crass materialism." Modern preaching has turned the cup which runneth over into a kind of cosmic dribble glass—God's practical joke on His people. Tilt the cup toward your lips, and its contents spill into your lap, in the presence of your enemies. Our children know better.