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*Philosophy of Ministry*

A paper submitted to  
Dr. Jerry O'Neill  
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READINESS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY

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by  
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When I first met with the session of Grace Reformed Presbyterian Church in Gibsonia, PA, as the first step toward being taken under care of Presbytery to enter the ministry, Pastor Jeff Stivason asked me a question that has kept me steadfast through the rigors of Seminary studies while working full-time, and helped me keep my hands to the plow through the intimidating and sometimes humiliating experience of Presbytery exams. He asked me pointedly, “Do you love the church?” That question was the best question he could have ever asked me, and revisiting it and answering it has been the refrain of resolve in my soul to see me through every time of doubt, exhaustion, and feelings of inadequacy. Do I love the church? Do I love her? And if so, what does that look like? It certainly includes sacrifice, but it also should exude steadfastness while wading through the ebb and flow of the joys and sorrows of ministry.

Do I love the church? I asked for qualification from Pastor Jeff before answering. Did he have the broader church of all the ages in mind? The denomination? The congregation? All of the above? He provided no assistance, and simply repeated the question. “Do you love the church?” His question was penetrating both in its succinctness and in its room for interpretation and later application. And it stays with me as I consider my motives for working late to properly do behind-the-scenes church internship work; for patiently navigating through conversations with some more thorny communicators in church; for endeavoring to get every bit of learning possible out of my classes when some neglect would easily go unnoticed; for bringing a sermon I’ve given numerous times with fresh vigor to a congregation who has yet to hear what God has laid on my heart as He met me in my studies; and for being willing to lead my family anywhere it seems the Lord would call us to serve. And, should He send me to a church, this question will guide me in working for peace and unity with the flock and my fellow servants and brothers in the higher courts, as well as humbly stand by what I hold to be vital Scripture truth when in the minority. I

love Jesus. And I love His church! While this paper will develop my philosophy of ministry gleaned from important Scriptures on serving the church, what will be behind it all is my ultimate motivation—the answer to the question Pastor Jeff posed to me. Yes, I love the church.

This question, Do you love the church?, should be asked of everyone preparing for ministry. It relates to the question Jesus asks three times of Peter in John 21 before He was to return to the right hand of the Father in heaven: “Do you love me?” And after Peter thrice affirms His love for Jesus, our Lord next tells Him what that should look like: “Feed my sheep.” If we love Jesus, as His undershepherds, we must love His sheep. And one takes care of those whom he loves. So a pastor friend and mentor in the Protestant Reformed Churches of America, Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma, advises about serving in the ministry: “Everything starts with loving Christ’s sheep like He does.” Another minister, after asking me questions about how I would handle difficult situations in the pastorate during a pre-Presbytery exam meeting, similarly counseled me that to be able and willing to do this work you must love Christ’s people.

This leads to the main Scripture behind my philosophy of ministry, Ephesians 5:25-32. Paul is addressing spousal relations mainly, but yet notes in verse 31 that he speaks about Christ and the church, that is, how the bridegroom sees and treats His bride. The example of Christ’s disposition toward and preparation of the Church to be received at the wedding supper is that of the lovely care of a loving husband. In verse 25, he says, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” If Christ loving His church is given as the example for the husband’s behavior towards his wife, it follows that the pastor is to love the church with similar affection and sacrificial deliberation on behalf of Christ’s bride. And to what purpose is this love? Verse 26 answers, “That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.” Jesus Christ died to purify the church. She must be holy to be joined in

union with Him in heaven. So the pastor's calling is largely to help the church be beautifully holy. And to what end? Verse 27, "That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." Ministers must have the hope of glory set before their eyes through their service in this earthly sojourn. They must always have in mind the marriage feast. They must be vigilant in helping people grow in holiness and loving anticipation of the coming of their spiritual lover—and that in preparing them to be holy, as He is holy. In fact, the term "without blemish" has a pregnant meaning here similar to how it is used in the Song of Solomon as the lover anticipates union with his bride: "Thou *art* all fair, my love; *there is* no spot in thee" (4:7). This idea of a bride having no spot or blemish used by both Paul and Solomon is a deliberate use of the Hebrew, *m'uwm*, a word almost exclusively used in Leviticus, and nearly without exception as regarding either the priest or the animal sacrifice needing to be without spot or blemish in the temple while approaching God's holy presence. For example, God commands Moses in Leviticus 21:17 to "Speak unto Aaron, saying, Whosoever *he be* of thy seed in their generations that hath *any* blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God." The Song of Solomon uses this word seemingly out of its immediate context, unless in fact Solomon is saying something very important by using a word with great significance in redemptive history to stand out, as is Paul.<sup>1</sup> Christ has definitively made His bride holy. And He ordains ministers to aid her in progressively readying herself in this holiness as she awaits her husband's return.

Further, verse 28 of Ephesians 5 enjoins us, "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself." Pastor Jeff's question returns to me again:

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<sup>1</sup> These insights on the full intent with the use of this word by both Solomon and Paul is gleaned from Professor C. J. Williams' Historical Writings class in the winter quarter of the 2009 academic year at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh.

“Do you love the church?” If I am to be a minister of God, and see the church as Christ does, I must love her as He does and give myself up to serving her as if she were my own body, “For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church” (vs. 29). As well, ministers and those of us that would be ministers are part of this body, the church – verse 30: “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.” Just as a husband takes care of his own body and his wife is his own flesh, so the minister will see and treat the church as Christ’s heavenly bride, as the precious body of which he himself also is a part and from which he cannot be severed. “Do you love the church?” is a question I find I am asking myself regularly as I prepare for ministry and seek a call from a particular group of Christ’s peculiar people, and I plan to ask it of myself throughout the ministry. My philosophy of ministry then, is that my answer always will be yes in both word and deed to the question, “Do you love the church?”

The undershepherds are called by Christ to feed His sheep out of love. The remainder of this paper will consider the main functions of an undershepherd as helpfully summarized by Bill Ascol: “Shepherds lead, feed and protect.”<sup>2</sup>

After having studied Richard Baxter’s *The Reformed Pastor*, I can think of no better Scripture than Acts 20:28 to further summarize the philosophy of ministry for an undershepherd: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” Every time a minister needs a reminder of what he has been set apart to do for the Lord Jesus Christ, he need only review the fact that he tends to the needs of the Lord’s flock, which He purchased with His own shed blood on the cross. Christ has secured them in His working out the

Covenant of Grace, and the Spirit gives us the privileged and solemn duty of taking special care of them. As well, in the fifth chapter of his first epistle, Peter tells the elders to “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over *God's* heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.” We should gladly take care of the church as those who have been given a holy charge, with an eye set on the glory that will never fade away so as to steer ourselves away from vain earthly benefits. And we as undershepherds, being ourselves part of the flock and under the care of Jesus Christ, must in our ministry first be careful to be diligent disciples concerned with presenting our own selves as holy before our Lord as we lead His sheep in holy service.

### **A Shepherd Leads**

In Acts 20:28, while readying to leave after three years of service in Ephesus, Paul tells the overseers of the church there to “Take heed unto yourselves.” If I am to serve the Lord Jesus Christ as a minister of the Gospel, I must always first be looking at myself as His disciple. I must commit to and continue on with growth in living a holy life according to His Word and through communion with Him in prayer. Important to review regularly throughout the year are the qualifications listed for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 in such self consideration.

And this is all to be an example to others. For instance, Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:24-26 about how a minister must conduct himself in service: “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Ascol, “Be Courageous,” in *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press,

And *that* they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.” I must lead in my manner and disposition as I serve the flock, even when dealing with difficulties and difficult people.

In general, a true leader leads not only in title, and not even mainly by virtue of ordination in its outworking practically speaking, but by example: “You cannot take your men where you yourself have not gone.”<sup>3</sup> This is especially important in how I will serve and lead the session and diaconate in serving and leading the Church. In addition to living a personal life of dedication to holiness in Christ, this includes leading in personal and group evangelism and outreach, modeling family worship and taking care of one’s own household in living a holy life in thanksgiving to God, honoring the Lord’s Day, exercising hospitality, being quick to offer forgiveness, and being humble. As well, it involves proper planning so as to be a good steward of the time and resources God has provided. Many seem to allow for pastors to live lives of unbridled busyness and resultant chaos. But how can a pastor counsel others to live structured lives not driven by the tyranny of the urgent if they themselves cannot protect family time and use their days and evenings in detailed diligence so as to develop a weekly rhythm of blessed work and worship that makes room for spontaneity and flexibility? I will need to be careful to plan ahead and keep to a weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual schedule that is agreed upon with the elders and understood by the church so as to best serve them all by taking heed unto myself while setting up longevity and making room for spontaneity. And this will be an important example in leading church members to live structured, disciplined lives aimed at holiness and happiness as Christian families serving together.

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2004) : 140.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Martin, “Train Other Men,” in *Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2004) : 323.

This also directs us to another important Scripture verse to serve as a theme in which the pastor must lead by example: discipleship, or making disciples. The Great Commission was a call to make disciples: “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matthew 28:18-20). I as the pastor will need to have in mind being an example in bearing testimony of Christ’s Kingship over all the nations to civic leaders wherever my congregation is located if I hope that they will do the same. And I must lead them in not only sharing the Gospel of grace, but teaching those who kiss the Son and trust in Him how to live for Him by lovingly obeying all that He has commanded; this will include leading in loving confrontation and discipline when necessary according to the guidelines of Matthew 18.

Much of this leading can be summarized in a simple philosophy of mine that has been developing through experience: talk to people. Whether it be in evangelism, hospitality, counseling, deeds of mercy, discipling, or disciplining, leading by example involves talking to people and responding to what God does with the live moments of ministry. We must be with our people and be in their communities, living out the life Christ commands for us all to model.

### **A Shepherd Feeds**

Closely related to leading, is feeding. After instructing the overseers to first check their own lives, Paul tells them in Acts 20:28 to “Take heed unto the flock.” The act of leading in ministry is built upon the foundation of proper feeding. So Paul instructs ministers in 1 Timothy 4:16 to “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou

shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” This idea of considering ourselves here relates to feeding on sound doctrine so that we may feed and save others by it through the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. Jesus commands us to feed His sheep. It is Christ’s chief concern as He prepares Peter to love and oversee the flock which Jesus will soon be leaving under the care of Peter and the other disciples as He ascends to His throne in heaven and prepares a place for those for whom He died. The leadership of structuring my time in ministry must include protecting study time. As the Reformation was grounded on a return to knowing the original languages of Scripture and the doctrine developed from it in the early church, I must commit to slowly but steadily building my reading ability of the original languages to catch the deep and powerful nuances and suggestions of Scripture in addition to the use of lexicons and modern tools in sermon preparation. Using Greek and Hebrew linear Bibles for casual weekly reading through the Bible in the languages with quick aids as needed to keep me motivated and moving will be important supplemental work alongside careful exegetical study on select passages for teaching and preaching. I need to develop a rich reservoir of the knowledge of God’s Word in its languages and in its covenantal language.

As well, I need to commit to monthly review and memorization of the Westminster Standards as they provide remarkably thorough, yet succinct answers to most of the common questions of the Christian faith and the main emphases of Scripture about what man is to believe concerning God and what God requires of man. In particular, I will reinforce memorization of the questions and answers to the Shorter Catechism for quick reference with formal and informal pastoral work as well as witnessing. I have found the memory work with the Shorter Catechism in Seminary classes to be of immediate use in teaching and witnessing, but I have also found that it takes regular review to keep them top of mind and ready for use, including in personal prayer

and devotions. And as I thus prepare myself, I will be equipped to train others in holy doctrine that leads to righteousness. This I deem more valuable than further higher and formal education unless necessary to serve the institutions of the church: “For my part, I conceive, that by serious talking of everlasting things, and teaching the creed, or some short catechism, you may grow more in knowledge, (though not in the knowledge of more things,) and prove much wiser men, than if you spent that time in studying common or curious, yet less necessary things.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul comments in summary fashion about two aspects of his three-year ministry to the church in Ephesus. In Acts 20:20-21, he says that he taught them both publicly and from house to house. Here is the body of pastoral work with disciples of Christ: the preaching of God’s Word from the pulpit—which has particular power for redeeming and convicting souls as God speaks to His people in Sabbath worship, along with the gauging of its success and gleaning what the people next need to hear through personal training during pastoral visits and catechizing, Bible studies and accountability relationships, and hospitality. And Paul also says in these verses that the sum and substance of what He taught was this Gospel: “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” Richard Baxter calls this our doctrine, and Matthew Henry affirms that “[Paul] preached faith and repentance, the two great gospel graces, the nature and necessity of them; these he urged upon all occasions.” Calvin also notes, “... he setteth down the sum of this doctrine in a few words, to wit, that he exhorted all men unto faith and repentance, as it was said before, that the gospel consisteth upon these two points only.” I must always with all my study, teaching, and preaching, have in mind to call people to repentance to God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ, as this is the heart of the Gospel in all of Scripture.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001) : 214.

Paul goes on to say in verse 27 that he did not neglect to declare to them the whole counsel of God. This further emphasizes what I must be committed to in the teaching and preaching ministry: knowing well and feeding others with all of the Word. This involves being very familiar with the Bible and its redemptive history, in history, by constantly reading it in order at least once a year besides detailed study for pulpit ministry of particular passages so that I have a fresh and growing deepness in the wells of redemptive history and the messianic consciousness of Scripture that I might present it to others for their nourishment beyond what surface level knowledge can provide. As well, I believe the whole counsel of God involves just as much knowing the Standards thoroughly and memorizing at least the Shorter Catechisms for constant use, for if one has great Bible memory and factual knowledge but cannot sum up the main doctrines of the faith that are revealed in Scripture, it is arguable whether they in fact teach the whole counsel of God, or even most of it. Here is why maintaining the unity of Scripture by intimately knowing its own unifying Covenant Theology across the Testaments is of utmost importance. I must be concerned with teaching the vital doctrines revealed in the Bible as much as the details of the Revelation itself. Here, membership classes are a very important platform to purposely use the Standards. As well, I would like to preach through the Larger and Shorter Catechisms in evening services while preaching through books of the Bible in the morning to maintain a proper, balanced diet for myself and the people.

In addition, just like Paul, I must go house to house and person to person to discern the health of each individual in the church, just as a good shepherd attends to the needs of each of his sheep, tend to their wounds, and helps them stay safe. So Jesus says, the Good Shepherd goes out and finds the one sheep that has strayed and brings him back into the fold. I, as a minister and a member of Christ's body, must love the church as my own body, and take care of each part

for a healthy whole. I am committed to setting up a manageable schedule for regular visitation, both formal and informal to facilitate fellowship and pastoral counseling. Richard Baxter notes, “If you intend the end of the ministry in the pulpit only, it would seem you take yourselves for ministers no longer than you are there. And, if so, I think you are unworthy to be esteemed ministers at all.”<sup>5</sup> A minister needs to share a meal with the family in preaching on the Sabbath, and bring supplemental sustenance in catechizing and visitation throughout the week as well as medicine to those who are sick. It is no accident that Baxter, Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, and others liken the minister’s work to that of the physician. Personal and compassionate care of individuals and families must accompany my studies and sermons for them, and this will give power to their preparation and trusting attention in their reception.

I also agree with RPTS Professor of Pastoral Studies and Homiletics, Dr. Dennis Prutow, that all ministries of the church should center around Sabbath Worship. For this is where God meets with His covenant people in a special way and speaks to them in the heavenlies (Hebrews 12), and as Jesus says in John 4, the Father seeks such to worship Him in Spirit and truth. All ministries should not be so much for the bride as for preparing the bride for her Husband who meets with her in worship to feed her, sooth her, nurture her, and prepare her for His return and the heavenly marriage. Evangelism, discipleship, hospitality, mercy, Bible studies, prayer groups, catechizing, and other core ministries should be aimed at and center around the rhythm of God’s ordained weekly Sabbath meeting with His peculiar, holy people whom He calls out for Himself. For here is where they are most fully fed by the means of grace—a lack of which will lead to severe malnutrition resulting in waywardness. I will focus on leading the people in preparing themselves to meet with God and the rest of Christ’s body each Sabbath to give Him

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<sup>5</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 65.

the worship due His name, and I will especially expect to see them fed there as He speaks through the preaching. And after each Sabbath rest until the eternal Sabbath comes, I will be concerned to protect the flock entrusted to me from hurting each other and from being led astray through serving them in the same ministries that are used to prepare them for weekly worship.

### **A Shepherd Protects**

Paul instructs the pastor in 2 Timothy 2:2-4, “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of *this* life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.” We pastors must always be looking for men to train up to support us and take our place in the next generation as chosen soldiers of the cross who can then go on themselves to teach others also. This military allusion is important not to miss. We must be militant until we enter into the Day of the Church Triumphant. We must not get weighed down by civilian affairs, and we must be ready to fight for the faith against the antichrist, who largely seeks to lead the sheep astray by feeding them lies. And while soldiers must respond swiftly to attacks, I believe the good work of a pastor is a well planned defense and careful hedge made around the church and her covenant children. This effort will no doubt include discipline and an action against heresy and ungodliness. But it must also, as much as possible, be preventative. Thus, the command for the elders to first take heed unto themselves, and then the flock. Proactive ministry that speaks to the people not only from pulpits and lecterns but also by working with them in the trenches will help greatly in protecting against error and unrighteousness. This is why Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, the good kings, and the prophets constantly are concerned to warn the

next generation and guide them in obeying God's Law. And this is why God has ordained elders to oversee the sheep and guide them through the landmines that the enemy lays before them:

That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, *even* Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:14-16.)

Notice that the whole body of Christ through its individual parts is to build itself up in love, "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also *is* Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12). And a healthy body has a properly working system against disease. It is helpful to see that even the gentle disciple who is known for love was vehemently jealous for and ardent in protecting Christ's flock:

**1 John 2:22-26:** Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: (*but*) *he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also*. Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that he hath promised us, *even* eternal life. These *things* have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you.

**2 John 1:7-11** For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into *your* house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.

And yet, the ultimate end in purposed vigor against such evil deceit to see our people sanctified and living in the truth: "For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 John 1:3-4).

In closing, I think it is helpful to keep before us the Doctrine of the Church. It is my opinion that all other doctrines overlap and best express themselves in ministry while working together as applied to the church and who she is. For the church, after all, is why we would be ministers, and to her we minister. Once Jesus Christ returns, there will be no further need of our pastoral services. Until then, we must love the Church, draw the elect into her, and build her up as the body and bride of Christ. With such resolve, it is helpful to reflect on the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America's *Testimony* alongside Chapter Five "Of the Church" in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

1. The Church is the body of Christ, which He has redeemed with His own blood, to be a chosen people unto Himself.
2. It is the mission of the Church to preserve, maintain and proclaim to the whole world the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the whole counsel of God; to gather into her fellowship those of every race and people who accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and promise obedience to Him; to build them up in their most holy faith, and train them to be faithful witnesses for Christ in all his offices; to maintain the ordinances of divine worship in their purity; witness against all evil; and in every way to seek the advancement of the Kingdom of God on earth.

I have hesitated to outline a mission and action plan in this paper, and rather kept it centered truly on my philosophy of ministry gleaned from Scripture that may serve me well in any context and capacity that the Lord may lead me in during my life. These vital principles will play out in establishing specific plans of action depending on various and varying dynamics. But through it all, and at the end, may Christ find me faithful in attesting to a Biblical philosophy of ministry in how I have served. The *Testimony* statement above will serve me well as a summary of this philosophy I have endeavored to put forth. And I will keep before me a vision of what the Lord promised Peter in Matthew 16:18: "I will build my church." He builds the church and builds her up, because He loves her and gave Himself up for her. I will aim to do the same.

Lastly, I hope to have a ministry that would leave such lasting sentiments in the hearts of the congregation as did the Rev. Ruther Hargrave who served an RP Church in Ohio for nearly four decades. In the September 17, 1930, issue of *The Covenanter Witness*, the congregations remembered him upon his death as follows: “ ... to us he gave the enthusiasm of his young manhood, the strength and vigor of middle age, and the rich, chastened experience of riper years ... Dr. Hargrave was a profound scholar, bringing out the deep things, the hidden things of the Word of God. He was an exceptionally fine logician, interpreting the Scriptures so logically that it was easy to grasp and remember ... We loved him for his gentleness and kingly kindness, for his genial disposition, making him a delightful companion. We revered him for his sympathetic nature, for his wise counsel and keen judgment, that made it easy to seek his advice.” What I hear in these words is that Dr. Hargrave’s people loved him because he first loved them. He loved the church.