

John Keim  
Theologies of Pastoral Ministry

This pastoral epistle is written in the framing of an actual letter to a younger pastor named Riley who had been mentored by me up until the point of his call to plant a church in a more urban/college town setting reaching the Gen Z demographic. My church was an innovative plant in the early 90's that grew into a megachurch in a suburban setting. This church separated from the UMC denomination in the recent splits and is functioning independently yet still rooted in conservative, orthodox, Wesleyan theology. This scenario blends some components of real-life ministry with some fictional scenarios to explore the topic at hand.

---

Riley,

It was so great to see you and your beautiful family last weekend when you stopped by for a weekend service. Memories flooded in of all the great ministry and conversations we shared in together during your residency years here. I often think on that time with great fondness and thank God for the relationship He has built with us as co-laborers for the Kingdom! I'm proud of you for the boldness in which you are pressing forward with your congregation to reach the unreached amidst the challenges that you are facing. The Church faces a new set of circumstances full of challenges and opportunities in reaching the next generation with the Gospel and I applaud your obedience to be rooted near the University so that you are able to reach Generation Z. I've given some thought and prayer to the difficulties you mentioned and per your request I wanted to share some thoughts and encouragement.

It won't shock you that I start off by offering a quote from one my heroes of the faith, John Wesley. "In religion I am for as few innovations as possible. I love the old wine best." You and I both

know that Wesley was the source of many innovations in faith but in it all he was always rooted to the historical Church and was willing to throw out any method that hindered the spread of the Gospel. As you press forward, hold tightly to orthodoxy but be encouraged to explore where God is leading you to innovate in methodology.

You mentioned that your greatest frustration is how there is an interesting blend of openness to spirituality and faith in this generation but that a complete lack of knowledge or experience with anything related to church has led to really unformed views that are subjective and very individualized. While I do see how this is causing you frustration, I wonder if a rethinking of this could actually shift this orientation to a point of momentum rather than contention. Hearing of the openness of your congregation, despite their misguided relativistic approaches to faith and spirituality, reminded me of Paul's encounter with the Greeks on Mars Hill. If you recall, Paul was also "provoked" by all the idols and the individualized ways people were approaching religion and faith. And while he continued to faithfully preach Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18), he saw the opportunity to meet people where they were at and move them forward. Rather than fight against the Athenians, he noted how religious they were and used their altar to the unknown god as an entry point to clarify and share Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life. Rather than fighting against Gen Z's openness to religion with lacking knowledge, use it as a springboard forward to point them to how the true longing they have is found in Christ alone. It is as St. Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

As I sought God on your behalf with how to move forward with this approach, I received four points of instruction and encouragement that I want to share with you. First, I want to stress that you continue faithfully preaching Jesus and His resurrection! Do not shrink back from declaring the hope we have in Christ. Paul was called a babbler and continually defended his

preaching, but he was consistent in sharing the fullness of the Gospel. After all we believe that, *“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”* (Romans 10:13-15). You and I both know how clearly God sent you to where you are so continue to preach so that they may hear which leads to belief which leads to salvation.

The next two steps that I want to encourage you in come from the great thinking of St. Ambrose and I believe apply greatly to the challenge of helping your people see a new way of living. *“He recognized that, in order to learn to live this way of life, competentes needed two things: models to imitate and moral principles to guide decisions.”* Not only do I think this approach is founded in the tradition of our faith but I see how this plays out through the use of Scripture.

When it comes to models to imitate, I want you to consider the fruits of the Spirit that Paul speaks of in Galatians 5 and seek out those in your core leadership team that are following Jesus and are demonstrating these fruits. The fruits of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” are compelling traits that when seen in others at the very least draw a curiosity and very likely will inspire people to action. When people are living by the Spirit it stands in such contrast to what is normal and typical around us as so many live according to the flesh. Remember, there is a very real principle that if people can’t see faith lived out, they can’t see themselves living faith out. Find unique and modern ways to elevate testimonies and give models of what a life lived in Christ is like.

Thirdly, Ambrose calls for moral principles to guide decisions and while pointing to Scripture for this can seem like an underselling of the power of God’s Word, it can introduce your people into

the practical and applicable way of following Christ. There is no limit to where you can take this as Scripture offers so much beautiful guidance in the way of Christ. Passages you could dive into include;

- And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. Luke 6:31
- One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. Luke 16:10
- And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. Galatians 6:9
- He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:8
- Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Philippians 2:3
- Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 4:2
- Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Romans 12:9-10

Like I said, there is no shortage of directions you could take people down throughout Scripture and in doing so you would not only be meeting this need for moral principles to guide decisions, but you would be building an understanding of what it means to follow God's ways.

The fourth and final step that I want to encourage you to take is perhaps the most important because without it these first three steps could turn this into a mechanical procedure that is not going to lead to life change. Remember that beyond all programs, methods and messages, the mission God has called you to is about building relationships. As St. Augustine

recognized, *“evangelical catechesis involved more than methods or message; ultimately it was about forming relationships... He thought it only natural to compare the experience of evangelization to the experience of one friend giving another a tour through the countryside.”*

Remember the passion and heart God gave you for the community He planted you in and the people He called you to. Live as Paul reminds us, putting on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Remember as you press forward in this you are not alone. God has given you a bride who is a co-worker in the mission you’re on. Those on your core team have had their hearts stirred for the vision God has given you. You know I’m in your corner cheering you on. But above and beyond all that God is with you. Take to heart these words of wisdom.

*“My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding—indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”* Proverbs 2:1-6

Until we’re together again may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!

-John