



The Book of Pastoral Rule

Pope Gregory I

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Recognized as the most thorough pastoral treatise of the patristic era, this sixth-century work by St Gregory the Great carefully details the duties and obligations of the clergy concerning the spiritual formation of their flock.

The Book of Pastoral Rule Details

Date : Published 2007 by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press (first published 600)

ISBN : 9780881413182

Author : Pope Gregory I

Format : Paperback 212 pages

Genre : Religion, Theology, Christianity, Christian, Nonfiction, Spirituality, History, Leadership, Church, Church History, Catholic

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From Reader Review The Book of Pastoral Rule for online ebook

Benjamin Vineyard says

St. Gregory the Great by Paulist Press St. Gregory the Great: Pastoral Care (Review)

I hear this book used to be given to new pastors in ancient times. Sometimes the new pastor would receive the previous pastor's copy, and perhaps told, "Read this to become what God desires." That's how I imagine it, anyway.

Gregory's book came as a sideline recommendation in a seminary class, not part of the curriculum. I was intrigued — always have been by the ancient Christians. What I found was a direct yet gentle spiritual guidance: pursue virtue, get rid of vice, and immerse yourself in the Scriptures, so that your people may flourish through your life, then your preaching and teaching.

The deepest impact: Essentially, don't be swept away by the cares of the organization but rather tend the inner life and all will come together. For a man of character brings life into the world and a man obsessed with "making church work" (Gregory had a different way of putting it) is not a man of life, but a man mucked in vainglory, concerned only with his legacy. The man of virtue, rooted in the Narrative, will clearly see beyond himself and see, finally, the Grace of God carrying people through. He then becomes a conduit, see-through himself, who points to Who is Greater.

What I felt lacking in Gregory's book was a sense of grace and God's love in Jesus. His obvious call was to a specific, virtuous way of life, which is admirable. Though, when divorced from the unconditional embrace of God who makes all things new, the reader might be left thinking, "Live up or ship out." This feel is better than some modern evangelical notions which abuse grace and essentially say, "It doesn't matter, just love yer Jesus and go to church." So, I appreciate Gregory's call to a specific way of life, and in that call can see why his book was read by so many and called necessary in previous eras.

I'd like to see a resurgence of books like this — if not Gregory's book itself. What would it be like to see seminaries say Yes to a specific way of life and not just a job opportunity?

I finished this book while staying at a monastery in Kentucky.

Jonny Parshall says

While written for spiritual leaders in mind, with but a little tweaking this book is fit for all leaders of every sort. In fact, the first two-thirds should be mandatorily read and practiced by any person running for office. For instance:

"Thus, it is necessary that when we are flattered by the wealth of virtues, we must turn the eye of our mind to our infirmity and allow it to humble itself. It should look not at the good things that it has done but at those things it has neglected, so that when the heart reflects upon its infirmity, it will be all the more strongly established before the author of humility...

"Let them first correct their own sins ... and then denounce what is punishable in others. But before they offer any words of exhortation, they should proclaim by their actions everything they wish to say."

Does that ring any bells? Anybody come to mind? This was written more than 1400 years ago and we still can't figure out how to determine a good leader of humans.

So yeah. An important book. A tough slog to read through, but worth it in the end.

Joseph Schoolland says

I appreciated a lot of his pastoral advice although his use of Scripture was often goofy.

Phil says

This book has taken an unusually long time for me to read, largely because I had kept it for breakfast table reading which is slow by definition and doubly so because the times the I have quiet time for breakfast with two active sons who love to hang with dad at breakfast is pretty small. It is also a bit dense, but I'm used to dealing with that when reading a patristic author.

This book represents one of the earliest attempts to define good pastoral practice, mostly for priests. It takes the 'soul-care' ideas out of monasticism and attempts to apply them to how to counsel regular people. That, for the period, was unusual because the two paths- monastic and regular- were often kept separate, suggesting that the monastic route was for the truly serious, while those Christians involved in an active life were somehow compromising. St. Gregory sees the need for spiritual support for all, so he offers this manual for that.

The book is, of course, intended for priests and, so, considers the right and wrong way to become a priest and how to perform as one. However, the balance of it considers how to counsel people with very different dispositions and habitual ways of sinning. The advice is, for its time, gentle and pastoral, although modern readers will find it jarring at times. There was a stronger stomach for invoking judgement back then, so that can put people off. Yet, the attention to how to advise individuals also contains much good sense and a concern for the spiritual well-being of many types of people.

This is, justifiably, an early classic in pastoral care and should be read as such. One does have to be careful about the cultural clash between our period and the patristic, but it is a good source.

Robert Wegner says

I was assigned to read this book for Church History and it has been my favorite book thus far on the subject of requirements and generic duties of the Pastoral Office. It's amazing to see the similarities in the objective of preaching God's Word to people from the 6th-7th century to now! Pope Gregory was a remarkable man and pastor and has delicately written to pastors all over the world a wonderful description of Biblical Shepherding. A must read for pastors!

Peter B. says

I was glad to read this book, since I had heard of its importance as one of the most complete and influential books from the early church on pastoral ministry. For example, King Alfred so valued it that he translated it into Anglo-Saxon for the leaders of his people in church and state.

Gregory seeks to bring together devotional piety from the monastery and the engaged public life of the pastor. He exhorts those who would rather remain in a monastery that they should use their gifts for the sake of God's people, as he also gives a warning to those who would be too quick to hold office without being trained in piety first. The book consists of qualifications for leadership, the life of the pastor, and how he is to direct his people (the third being the largest part). Gregory pays careful attention to the varied circumstances the pastor mind find among his people and the nuanced way the pastor ought to lead his people.

I noticed that Gregory's directions for the pastor and for the training of others focus on training in godliness and growth in Christian character. It actually reminded me a little of the way the Puritans wrote (e.g. *The Reformed Pastor*, by Richard Baxter). In both cases, the emphasis on character seems to correspond with the belief that Christians can actually make progress in becoming better Christians (rather than merely gaining a deeper understanding of our sin). This belief shapes the way we look at pastoral training and the pastoral role in the church. The Puritans were operating in a more developed and more refined theology than Gregory, but they have a similar practical concern and familiarity with Scripture.

Gregory does resort to allegorical interpretation to bolster his points, and the result of those attempts was often not all that convincing to me. Yet, if he used them as illustrations, rather than allegorical interpretations, then I might see their usefulness. In fact, they might then look like some of the illustrations that the Puritans use in their writings.

"Because the majority are similar to myself in inexperience, not knowing how to measure themselves but crave the opportunity to teach what they have not yet learned, and who appraise lightly the burden of authority in accordance with their ignorance of the magnitude of its strength, let them be censured at the beginning of this book" (from Gregory's introduction).

Adam says

This manual for pastors by St Gregory the Great is very, very good. I regret that I didn't read it while I was in seminary because it would have had a significant impact on my training and formation.

This is the most influential ancient work written specifically for pastors regarding their preaching, teaching, and counseling, and though it is 1400 years old, not a single sentence in it is without value. Indeed, Gregory's guidance is timeless, which is very cool to think about. A pastor living in a tiny hut in central Italy in the year 600 had some of the same "a-ha!" moments while reading this book that I have had in a house in southern Minnesota in the year 2018 while reading this book. If that is not an incredible indication of Gregory's brilliance and wisdom, and a testimony to the beautiful work of the Holy Spirit, I don't know what is.

The book is organized into four parts, with the third part composing roughly 60% of the entire volume and the final part being a scant three and a half pages. Therefore most of Gregory's advice is found in part three. Here Gregory offers basically a series of scenarios and gives spiritual direction on the proper way to preach and minister to different sorts of people. This is, as the name explicitly states, a book for pastors in their ruling, but I have not doubt of its great value for laypeople as well, especially those who are engaged in teaching or church leadership.

As a conclusion to this brief review I'll include three of my favorite quotations from the book:

"For one fasts not for God, but for himself, if he does not offer to the poor what he denies himself during the period of fasting, but rather saves it for a later time for his own stomach" (139).

"[The mis-interpreters of Scripture] should consider that sacred Scripture is lit as a type of lantern for us in the night of the present life, but when its words are not understood properly, it produces not light but darkness; although a flawed understanding does not lead directly to a perversion of mind, unless it is first inflated by pride. For when some think that they are wiser than others, they despise to follow another to a better understanding. What is worse, in their desire to create for themselves an image of expertise among the uninformed masses, they work diligently to destroy the correct interpretation of others and to replace it with their own perversions" (157).

"Let [pastors] first perform lofty deeds and then convince others to live well. Let them first strike themselves with the wings of their thoughts. Let them carefully examine whether there is anything about themselves that is sluggish and, if so, correct it with strict observance. Only then should they tell others how to live their lives. Let them first correct their own sins through tears and then denounce what is punishable in others. But before they offer any words of exhortation, they should proclaim by their actions everything that they wish to say" (207).

Mitchell Dietrich says

Written 1400 years ago and still relevant to pastoral issues

Eric Chappell says

My March pick for my Ancient Mentors reading series was Gregory the Great's Pastoral Care. Gregory's is considered early Medieval, so I chose him as an influential figure of the period. F.H. Dudden (1905) says that Gregory's maxims in Pastoral Care were what "made the bishops who made modern nations." The ideal Gregory upheld was for centuries the ideal of the West's clergy.

Pastoral Care (or Regula Pastoralis) was originally written in 590 CE as an apology for Gregory's wish to escape the office of pope after the death of Pelagius II. Similar works had already been written by Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, and especially Nazianzus' work on pastoral care was influential for Gregory's life and work. Structurally, the book is divided into four parts. First, Gregory presents the difficulties of pastoral ministry and the office of shepherd. Second, he discusses the importance and necessity of the inner and outer life of the pastor for the work of ministry. Third, in Gregory's longest section he advises on how the ministry of the Word is to vary depending on audience--your teaching should be context-

appropriate. Fourth, Gregory highlights the importance of always remembering and recognizing your infirmities so that you will not become conceited in the pastorate.

Overall, I'm happy I read the book. That said, it wasn't the most mind-blowing read ever. What intrigued me most (while in many places bored me to death) was Gregory's attention to the various struggles believer's face in the Christian life and their need to have tailored, specific ministry according to their needs. Gregory is not a great exegete. You'll find his interpretation of passages strained and wanting, e.g. when discussing the inner and outer life of the ministry Gregory makes multiple allegorical interpretations of the garments and ministry of the Aaronic priesthood; Aaron's breastplate was symbolic of purity of thought, the pomegranates unity of faith. He was a man of his time, but I appreciated the effort to try to arrive at a biblical model of New Testament pastoral ministry using the breadth of Scripture.

Notes:

Part 1:

- the government of souls is the art of arts
- don't foul the water of the sheep by your crooked steps
- don't busy yourself with external matters and neglect and forget yourself (and vice versa)
- Isaiah & Jeremiah give picture of one who laudably desires the office and one driven to it by compulsion. There are commendable desires and dangers in both.
- loved chapter 9: The mind of those who crave pre-eminence, for the most part flatters itself with imaginary promises of performing good works--basically, the mind lies to itself about itself and makes believe it loves good work when actually it does not and wishes for mundane glory.
- chap 11--not all Levites could offer at Temple--only those who were ceremonial set apart and without blemish.

Part 2: Life of a Pastor

- what fascinated me about this passage was Gregory's desire to reflect on ministry through the lens of the OT priesthood. I think something like this could be done well if it was seen through a redemptive-historical lens of Christ's person and work as the High Priest and Chief Shepherd.
- Purity of thought
- exemplary conduct
- discreet in silence/profitable in speech: don't be a dumb dog, unable to bark
- Be a neighbor to all: ascend in thought and descend in service
- be a comrade to good and stern with evil
- Don't be so busy with external that you neglect internal, and vice versa (e.g. Moses and Jethro)--Study AND Serve
- don't be zealous to please men: "For that man is an enemy to his Redeemer who on the strength of the good works he performs, desires to be loved by the Church, rather than by Him. Indeed, a servant is guilty of adulterous thought, if he craves to please the eyes of the bride when the bridegroom sends gifts to her by him."
- don't put cushions under every elbow
- seek to be loved in order to be listened to (1 Cor 10:33; Gal 1:10)

Part 3:

- Not all teaching is suitable for everyone
- Like a harpist, all one doctrine, but not same exhortation
- Gregory lists all different types of people--reminds me of William Perkins, The Art of Prophesying
- be harsher with men; gentle with women
- severe with youth; gentle with elderly
- admonish the wise to stop knowing what they know
- reprove insolent by showing what they've done has been ill-done

-How to admonish the sick: The sick are to be admonished to consider what great health of the heart is bestowed by bodily affliction, for it recalls the mind to a knowledge of itself and renews the memory of our infirmity, which health commonly disregards.

-gospel-driven patience: To preserve the virtue of patience, the sick are to be admonished ever to bear in mind how great were the evils endured constantly by our Redeemer at the hands of those whome He had created, how many horrible insults of reproaches He endured, how many blows in the face He received at the hands of scoffers, while He was daily snatching the souls of captives from the power of the ancient Enemy; that while cleansing us from the power of salvation, He did not screen His face from the spitting of perfidious men, that He silently endured the scourging to free by His mediation from eternal torments, that He endured the buffeting to give us everlasting honors among the choirs of angels, that while saving us from being pierced by our sins, He did not shrink from offering His head to thorns; that He took the bitter gall in His thirst in order to inebriate us with everlasting sweetness, that when mockingly adored, He held his peace and adored in our behalf the Father, though equal to Him in the Godhead, and that He who was the life passed to death that He might prepare life for those who were dead. Why, then, is it considered hard that a man should endure stripes from God for his evil-doing, if God endured so great evil in requital for His own good deeds? Or what man is there of sane mind who is ungrateful for being himself smitten, when He who lived here without sin did not depart hence without a scourging?

-The pride of the Devil became, therefore, the occasion of our perdition, and the humility of God proved to be the pledge of our redemption. For our Enemy, created like all other things, wished to appear superior to all, but our Redeemer, remaining great above all things, deigned to become little among all. Let the humble, therefore, be told that in abasing themselves, they rise to the likeness of God.

-don't love the pilgrimage over the home-country (to those who are well off and wealthy)

-Gregory says that marriage is primarily for procreation and not pleasure, so you shouldnt have too much sex.

-the preacher should make himself heard by deeds more than words (wrong).

Part 4:

-the consciousness of virtue is a pitfall for the soul.

-basically, after you preach remind yourself of all your failings so you don't become proud.

Jay says

Very readable and useful. The translation of "rector" as "spiritual director" throughout was weak sauce though.

This is a great series from St. Vladimir's Press.

Here are some quotes:

“For it is very often the case that the discipline of good works, which was maintained in a time of tranquility, is ruined in the assumption of leadership. For an inexperienced sailor can steer a ship in calm waters, but even an experienced seaman is disordered by a storm. For what, indeed, is a position of spiritual authority but a mental tempest in which the ship of the heart is constantly shaken by storms of thoughts, tossed back and forth, until it is shattered by a sudden excess of words like hidden rocks of the sea?” (Gregory the Great, The Book of Pastoral Rule, p. 42)

“He must, therefore, be the model for everyone. He must be devoted entirely to the example of good living. He must be dead to the passions of the flesh and live a spiritual life. He must have no regard for worldly

prosperity and never cower in the face of adversity. He must desire the internal life only. His intentions should not be thwarted by the frailty of the body, nor repelled by the abuse of the spirit. He should not lust for the possessions of others, but give freely of his own. He should be quick to forgive through compassion, but never so far removed from righteousness as to forgive indiscriminately. He must perform no evil acts but instead deplore the evil perpetrated by others as though it was his own. In his own heart, he must suffer the afflictions of others and likewise rejoice at the fortune of his neighbor, as though the good thing was happening to him. He must set such a positive example for others that he has nothing for which he should ever be ashamed. He should be such a student of how to live that he is able to water the arid hearts of his neighbors with the streams of doctrinal teaching. He should have already learned by the practice and experience of prayer that he can obtain from the Lord whatever he requests, as though it was already said to him, specifically, by the voice of experience: "When you are speaking, I will say 'Here I am.' " (Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 43-44)

"The sick should be advised that to preserve the virtue of patience it is necessary that they continuously consider the great evils that our Redeemer suffered from those whom he created: that he endured so many horrible insults; that while he was daily rescuing souls from the captivity of the ancient enemy, he was beaten by the men who insulted him; that while washing us with the water of salvation, he did not hide his face from the spitting of evil men; that while he freed us from eternal punishments by his counsels, he tolerated great punishment; that while he gave everlasting honors among the choir of angels, he endured blows; that while he saved us from the piercing of our sins, he submitted his head to the crown of thorns, that while he filled us with eternal sweetness, he accepted the bitter gall; that while, for our account, he adored the Father, though he was equal with him in divinity, he remained silent when adorned mockingly; and so that he might prepare life for the dead, he gave his life unto death. Why, then, is it so difficult to believe that humans should endure suffering from God for the evil that they do if God endured so great an evil in response to his goodness? And who with healthy reasoning can be ungrateful for his suffering if God himself did not go without punishments, even though he was without sin?" (Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 117-8)

"The lazy should be instructed that, often, if we do not do what we can when we have the opportunity, soon we will not have the opportunity to do what we want. For the desire of the mind, when it is not accompanied by the appropriate zeal, loses its desire for good works, as it is overcome by a powerful, but hidden, sloth. As it is aptly said through Solomon: "Sloth casts a deep sleep." For a lazy person perceives himself to be awake, but he grows all the more torpid from doing nothing. Thus, sloth is said to "cast a deep sleep" because gradually even the vigilance of consciousness is lost when one ceases to pursue good works with zeal. And so it was well added: "And an idle soul will be hungry." For when the soul does not incline itself to greater things, neglecting itself, its desire increases for inferior things." (Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 125-6)

"For when we minister what is necessary to the indigent, we bestow not what is ours, but what rightly belongs to them." (Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 146)

"For surely, whoever seeks his own glory while speaking the word of God invades the rights of the Giver, and does not fear to promote himself over the One from whom he has received that thing that is praised." (Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 159)

"For those who prosper in their temporal desires should be advised that when things seem to go their way, they should not neglect to seek the One who has given to them, rather than focus their souls on what was given. Otherwise, they will love their pilgrimage more than their homeland, and they will transform the supplies for their journey into an impediment for their arrival. Or, put another way, they will grow to love the

dim light of the moon and refuse to see the clarity of the sun.” (Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 165)

“For often, there are some who return to the Lord after having committed sins of the flesh, and these show themselves to be ardent doers of good works because they see themselves as being all the more damnable for their evil deeds; whereas some of those who preserve the integrity of their flesh believe that they have little in their past that needs to be deplored and think that their life is sufficiently innocent, and therefore do not inflame themselves by striving to be fervent in the spirit.” (Gregory the Great, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, p. 178)

Katie says

Gregory the Great, along with Augustine, is one of the few medieval writers who you can read today and occasionally forget that they were writing their works about 1500 years ago. Of course, it's substantially different - there are not a huge number of best-sellers today that will ramble at length about the symbolic significance of Old Testament priestly robes - but the core of the *Pastoral Rule* is really accessible. It reads a bit like a self-help book (though Gregory envisioned it as a book on how to help others) and a lot of the advice is still really good. Gregory was an accomplished guy on all sorts of levels, but I think quite a bit of it stemmed from the fact that he was just really emotionally insightful and that he was a very empathetic person. It's a simple message: in order to be an effective spiritual guide, you have to help different people in different ways. But the details really shine, and the fact that Gregory felt the need to account for every aspect of a person (their marital status, their age, all their various tendencies and dispositions) makes this a helpful book for anyone to read.

If you are a Christian - particularly in any sort of leadership role - I'd recommend giving the whole thing a read. Same goes for any historians. But even if you aren't, it's still worth a quick look, even if you just glance through the sections that strike your fancy.

Peter Stonecipher says

Excellent handbook for pastors. There are numerous comments and interpretations that are outdated, but if you take into account that this was written around 590, this is to be expected. Lots of helpful encouragements and challenges to those in ministry. I would consider this the early church's version of "The Reformed Pastor" by Richard Baxter.

Jeffrey Moore says

A classic of Christian spirituality and pastoral practice. Some of Gregory's suggestions seemed rather straightforward, but that could be because this work has been so integrated in to the Catholic tradition by this point. However, there were a few really mind-blowing insights that will stick with me for awhile, and these alone make the read worth it.

Fr. Ted says

While the Patristic writers have some great insights into the Scriptures and the Christian life, the ones who are rhetoricians require reading a lot to come to the gems. Gregory the Great relies heavily on a particular kind of allegorical interpretation of Scriptures that does little for me. His "proof texts" supporting the points he is making often appear to me to be totally random choices of most obscure passages. His insights are often right on, and surprisingly apropos by modern psychological insights into being human. But his efforts to prove his points from Scripture put a real strain on credibility in terms of any interpretive sound principles. His allegorizing certainly decontextualizes each text he quotes leaving the verse to mean whatever he says it does. So while I would encourage believers to read the Patristic writers to gain insight into the early church's use of

Scripture, in this case you may come away with good insights into the Christian life (his points are well taken) but you would have a hard time in the modern world convincing people that the texts he quotes have anything to do with the truth he is offering.

Alex Stroshine says

This is an amazingly practical book that provides profound insights into spiritual direction and pastoral care. Gregory the Great, a pope admired even by John Calvin, begins by laying out the qualifications needed for those seeking spiritual leadership before proceeding to discuss the life of a pastor. The majority of the book is concerned with providing direction in dealing with various personal and spiritual maladies that afflict believers. Gregory does not institute a sweeping, universal proscription for each issue but constantly insists that individuals must be dealt with differently depending on their specific circumstances. For instance, "the forward and the timid are to be advised differently" (p. 100). Or again, "Those who are successful in worldly pursuits and those who desire the things of this world but are unsuccessful should be advised differently" (p. 165). Gregory attempts to provide counsel and guidance for these various circumstances, noting how each circumstance has conditioned the individual and why they may or may not respond to different advice. He also notes that sometimes a lesser vice must be tolerated so as to prevent a greater transgression. On pages 204-05 he states:

"it is often the case that when one does little to temper his gluttony, he will, at the same time, be pressed by the temptations of lust, nearly to the point of succumbing to them. Such a one is likely to be terrified, and so he will try to control himself by fasting. But [being unprepared for that discipline], he now risks falling into vainglory. In such a case, it is impossible to extinguish the lust without permitting the vanity. Which vice, then, should be more strenuously pursued if not the one that is the most immediately dangerous? Therefore, through the virtue of abstinence, the vice of arrogance must be tolerated in the short-term; otherwise, through his gluttony he would fall into lust and lose his life entirely."

Gregory relies a lot on allegorical exegesis, making some interpretations and connections that sometimes seem dubious at best. Although 'The Book of Pastoral Rule' was completed around 591 AD, it offers a wealth of relevant, insightful and compassionate guidance for Christians today and is well worthy reading, both to counsel others as well as to diagnose one's own spiritual health.
