

# Unfaithful Ministers

Ezekiel 34

On Friday evening a committee of presbytery installed OPC minister Jonathan Hunt as pastor of our church in Sheffield, Ontario. Since I had had a part in establishing the first OPC congregation in Ontario many years ago, and since I count many of the Canadian pastors and elders as personal friends, and since I felt that my presence as assistant clerk would be an encouragement to the Sheffield congregation, I made the effort to attend the installation service. Norma went with me. I was the only Michigan presbyter in attendance that evening. It was a memorable service, and both Norma and I were very glad that we made the 500-mile round trip.

What is an installation service? It is a formal worship service conducted by the presbytery (or by a committee of presbytery) for the purpose of installing a minister as pastor of a particular congregation. The man installed would have preached at that particular church before as a guest preacher, but now, he is installed as the regular minister with responsibility and charge for that congregation. The language “installed as pastor” is significant, for it recognizes that as the man preaches, teaches and fulfills the duties of his office, he is doing so as the minister of Christ—representing Christ—and carrying out his Great Commission, “Go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.” When a faithful minister proclaims the gospel, he represents Christ. He is not merely giving his own personal opinion but declaring Christ’s authoritative word, with Christ’s authority.

Friday night’s installation service was really a blessing. As a matter of fact, it seems as though all the Canadian installation services are really special! When a man is installed at one of our Michigan churches, sadly, often only a small portion of the congregation—maybe 20–30%—shows up. But in Canada, not only does almost the whole congregation attend, but people from other Reformed churches come as well. The service the other night had to be held at a larger church in order to hold the crowd.

What happens in an installation service? There is a call to worship, statement of the purpose of the meeting, enthusiastic congregational singing of Psalms and hymns, the reading and preaching of a Scripture text by a designated minister, public vows by the minister and congregation, the declaration by the moderator that the minister has been duly installed as pastor of the particular congregation; the giving of a charge to the *minister*, charging him faithfully to discharge the responsibilities of his office; and a charge to the *congregation*, charging the people to receive the Word of God from his mouth and to provide for his worldly maintenance as their pastor. The service closes with the singing of the Doxology

and the pronouncement of the benediction by the newly-installed minister—fittingly, his first official act as their minister, pronouncing God’s blessing upon his people. Faithful ministers are a blessing to their congregations.

Among the Reformed churches in Ontario, at the end of the service there are greetings from other local congregations: Reformed Presbyterian Church of Canada, Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Free Reformed Church, United Reformed Churches, and so on. Here were local pastors bringing greetings and expressions of good will from their respective congregations. I was particularly impressed that the pastor of the United Reformed Church located a stone’s throw from the Sheffield OPC brought enthusiastic greetings, welcoming the new minister. There was no sense of rivalry but sincere prayers and good wishes that each congregation would thrive and prosper under the proclamation of the gospel. After the service, the saints gathered in the church hall to enjoy refreshments and fellowship with one another. All ages were represented, and no one seemed to be in a hurry to leave.

As I later reflected it occurred to me that the Canadian installation services are more a celebration than a perfunctory business meeting. They do not merely go through the motions, they do it with enthusiasm! I expressed to the ruling elder who hosted us overnight that this is rather fitting, since Scripture records that when Christ ascended up on high, “he led captivity captive, and gave *gifts* unto men”—including “pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:8ff.). Faithful pastor-teachers are Christ’s *gift* to his church, assisting his people to grow in grace and service to his kingdom. After five years without a minister, shepherded only by the ruling elders under a ministerial advisor appointed by presbytery, the ascended Christ gave Pastor Hunt to the Sheffield OPC. It was a happy occasion. Humans typically celebrate gift-giving with appropriate festivities. Is it not fitting that the church should celebrate the gift of a pastor? Churches should learn from our Canadian brothers and sisters.

Our presbytery has heard testimony that Pastor Hunt is a faithful minister, teaching “publicly and from house to house,”<sup>1</sup> living Christ among his people. The congregation’s vote to call him as their pastor was unanimous. But sad to say, not every pastor is faithful. In our text this morning the prophet Ezekiel delivers the LORD’s verdict against unfaithful shepherds. We read the entire chapter for context, but we are going to focus particularly on the first 16 verses. I have three points: (1) Without a faithful shepherd, (2) The divine verdict, and (3) The promise of the faithful Shepherd. First,

### **1. Without a faithful shepherd (vv. 2–6)**

Note in our text who is speaking and who is addressed. God tells Ezekiel: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20:20

says the Lord GOD to the shepherds” (v. 2). Here, the prophet is commanded to prophecy specifically against “the shepherds of Israel,” that is, the Levites who were tasked with instructing God’s people out of the Torah, the law given by Moses. He is to begin his message, “Thus says the Lord GOD [אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה].” Notice particularly the spelling of the words “Lord GOD.” Notice that the word “GOD” is spelled in all caps. Now if you are a Bible reader, and are observant, you will often see the word *Lord* written in all caps: “LORD.” This is the English convention for representing what is called the Tetragrammaton—the four-letter word representing God’s personal name in translation. This word is spelled in Hebrew *yod hē vav hē*. The Hebrew Bible is written in all consonants, and beginning around the time of Ezra the scribe, when faithful Hebrews returned from the seventy-year captivity in Babylon, the scribes, concerned because God’s people knew Aramaic, the Babylonian language, better than their native Hebrew, started writing little markings above, below and within the Hebrew consonants, to represent the vowels. They didn’t change the sacred consonants; they just added the vowels that were spoken in the public reading of the text. (A word cannot be pronounced without vowels.) But when they came to the divine name, they deliberately put the *wrong* vowels with the consonants to remind God’s people not to pronounce the divine name. The third commandment says, “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain,” and the scribes reasoned, *If we don’t say the Name, we won’t take it in vain*. But God had not said, “Don’t use my name at all,” but rather, “Don’t take it in vain.” The scribes did not change any of the sacred consonants, but they added the vowels from the word Lord [אֲדֹנָי], written in such a way as to render the word essentially unpronounceable. They taught the people to say “LORD” when they they came across the divine Name. Because of that, we do not have perfect certainty concerning the pronunciation of the Name, but we are reasonably sure it was pronounced Yahweh. So in our text the prophet Ezekiel says, “Thus says the Lord GOD [אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה].” Here is Ezekiel’s favorite term for God, used some 217 times in this book—nine times in chapter 34 alone. The One who speaks is the Lord [אֲדֹנָי]—that is, the One who is to be obeyed—and his name is Yahweh. Thus, what we have in this chapter is not Ezekiel’s personal opinion, but rather the Word of the Lord Yahweh (the translation in the Legacy Standard Bible).

Ezekiel was a recognized prophet during the Babylonian captivity. He was one of the Jewish exiles who settled at Tel-Abib, on the banks of the Chebar, “in the land of the Chaldeans.” He had probably been carried away captive with Jehoiachin about 597 B.C. His prophetic call came to him “in the fifth year of Jehoiachin’s captivity” (594 B.C.).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Easton’s Bible Dictionary, “Ezekiel” (Logos Bible Software); cf. Ezek. 1:1–3

The best and brightest of the Jews had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, including the Levites. There was no public worship of God at that time, since the temple where worship happened had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The Levites were the recognized teachers in Israel. The great prophet Moses, in his final words to the people of Israel, had blessed the people, tribe by tribe. In Deuteronomy 33:8ff. we read, “And of Levi he said . . . ‘They shall *teach* Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your law.’” It had been long recognized among the Jews that those who taught the law of God were duty-bound to teach it accurately, explaining to the people what God had said, and not mixing in their own thoughts and opinions. But sinful man has a propensity to disobey, and teachers of God’s law are not immune from this. When the Savior came, he criticized the teachers of the law, saying, “in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”<sup>3</sup>

People of God, your duty is to hold your preachers and teachers accountable to teach the Word of God faithfully and truly. The church has a mandate to teach the whole counsel of God—everything that’s in the Bible, and nothing that’s *not* in the Bible. When you hear the Word of God taught, you should be discerning. Be like the Bereans, and search the Scriptures daily to verify that your teachers are teaching the Word of God properly. Recently there was a big conference of Roman Catholic bishops that met in Baltimore. One courageous lone bishop stood up and rebuked his fellow bishops for staying quiet at the news of an openly homosexual news anchor who joined the Roman Catholic church and affirmed the faith with his “husband” at his side. This did not happen quietly—the story appeared in *People* magazine. The courageous bishop spoke pointedly to his fellow bishops. He said: “How long will you halt between two masters? If you believe Christ is Lord, then follow Him! If the world is your master, then go to it! But no longer profane His sanctuary while you betray the Cross! . . . You harm the little ones when you welcome couples caught up in sin, flaunting their sad disordered lives and instead of calling them to repentance in Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup> At this august meeting of bishops the courageous bishop was all but ignored. The moderator ignored him. No other bishop attempted to publicly engage him. Sad!

Those who teach the Word must teach it accurately. James says, “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (Jas. 3:1).

In our Ezekiel text the Lord GOD speaks pointedly to the teachers of his Word: “Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: ‘Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and

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<sup>3</sup> Matt. 15:9

<sup>4</sup> <https://people.com/gio-benitez-openly-gay-abc-news-weekend-anchor-joins-catholic-church-11847298>; <https://x.com/BishStrick/status/1989309016342753727>

clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock.”” Here were men who were supported by the tithes and offerings of God’s people, but they were not feeding the flock with the pure teachings of God’s Word. They received a salary from the church, but they failed to teach God’s Word accurately. There was a dearth of faithful teaching of Scripture in Ezekiel’s day. And in our day much teaching of God’s Word is unfaithful. Where are the faithful shepherds who lead God’s people aright? Thank God that there are faithful Reformed churches that hold their pastors and elders accountable to teach the Word of God accurately. When an OPC minister teaches the Bible, his teaching is subject to review by presbytery. If he teaches false doctrine and is unrepentant, he can be deposed from office. This is a protection in being a member of a faithful Presbyterian church.

Secondly, we see

## **2. The divine verdict (vv. 7–10)**

In the second paragraph of our chapter Ezekiel reviews the LORD’s case against the shepherds of Israel who did not feed his flock the pure truth of his inspired Word. Here were shepherds who saw their job merely as means of getting ahead and achieving the good life. They did not really have a heart to know God and discern his will. They refused to expend the effort of studying and mastering God’s Word. They did not visit their flock. They did not go after sheep who strayed. They did not care enough to do the difficult, sometimes messy work of shepherding. They left their sheep defenseless against predators.

A true shepherd loves his sheep. He knows that he himself will prosper as his sheep prosper. Animal rights activists assert that shepherds, hog farmers and cattlemen do not care for their animals—that their animals are neglected, underfed and abused for the sake of profits. But those who work with animals know that they have a vested interest in keeping their livestock healthy. They know that if they abuse their animals, they will not be able to sell them, so they take care of them. In the same way, Christ’s true undershepherds have a vested interest in caring for their flock. They want their sheep to prosper. They want their sheep to know God’s truth. They know that where there is no knowledge of God’s will, the people perish.

In John 10 Jesus highlights his special relation to his flock: they are his sheep; he loves them and cares for them. Note his words: “But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.” Jesus is saying, “I am not a hireling—a mere employee, someone with no vested interest in the flock. The sheep are mine, and I care for them. I have their best interest at heart. I know and want what is best for them. I know they need to be led in the green pastures of

my Word. They need to know that I, the Savior, love them and will infallibly bring my whole flock to heaven, where they can bask in my presence, savoring the precious truths of my Word eternally. I want them to understand that to know me is life eternal.” Here is the wonderful future promised to all those who love God and desire his worship. The Chief Shepherd promises that he will “deliver” his flock from the mouths of false shepherds. A mouth can be used in two ways: to speak or to ingest food. Here was the problem in Ezekiel’s day and also the problem in our own: mouths of pastors and elders that should be speaking God’s truth are interested only in consuming food. The true Shepherd will deliver his flock from the mouth of unfaithful undershepherds. “Deliver” means to *set free*, as in the prayer, “Deliver us from evil,” wherein the Christian expresses his longing to be set free from sin—something that will be perfectly realized at the final day. Christian, the Lord Jesus, your Savior, is also your deliverer. Though there are many false teachers in this world who want to use you to enlarge their personal wealth and following, Jesus is your strong Deliverer. “Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield, be thou still my strength and shield.”<sup>5</sup>

Here is the divine verdict: “therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them.’” Here is a vivid reminder to all teachers of the Bible that they are responsible ultimately to the God of heaven. He is not distant and distracted. He takes notice of what is being taught in his church! When the appointed shepherds fail to perform the duties of their office, he commits himself ultimately to remove them. Knowledgeable sheep likewise will call for the removal of unfaithful shepherds. A church office should not be a ticket to personal advancement but a sounding board for expressing the truth of God’s Word.

Thirdly, we see

### **3. The promise of the faithful Shepherd (vv. 11–16)**

Verse 11 begins, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.’” His appointed undershepherds have failed, so now he himself will search for his sheep and seek them out until he finds them. Here is a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When he came to this earth he plainly said: “The Son of man is come to *seek* and to *save* that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). God appoints earthly shepherds for the help of his people, but when those earthly shepherds fail, he comes personally to save them. This he did in the person of Christ. Note: he does *not* say, “I will come to set a good example and enable my

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/guide-me-o-thou-great-jehovah/>

people to save themselves,” which is essentially the teaching of Roman Catholicism and other churches that no longer preach the gospel. The Roman Catholic Baltimore Catechism states that “purgatory is the state in which those suffer for a time who die . . . without having satisfied for the punishment due to their sins.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, sinners satisfy for the punishment due to their sins: sinners save themselves! This is the opposite of the gospel: “Christ Jesus came into the world *to save sinners*.”<sup>7</sup> Christ alone saves!

Ezekiel 34 is a chapter that faithful ministers and elders need to take to heart. Here is a text that God’s people need to know well, so they can hold their ministers and elders accountable to it. Without a clear vision of what the Bible actually teaches, God’s people will perish. Brothers and sisters, it is vitally important that we know this text!

At the installation service the other night the minister took the vow, “Do you solemnly promise that . . . you will endeavor faithfully to discharge all the duties of a pastor to this congregation,” and the congregation took the vow, “Do you promise to receive the word of truth from his mouth with meekness and love.” May God grant them—and us—the ability to faithfully keep those vows.

May the Church of Christ purge out unfaithful ministers and listen to faithful ministers that point them to Christ, the only Savior for sinners. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Q&A 1391

<sup>7</sup> 1 Tim. 1:15