

# "Far other aims" a meditation on the pastor's responsibility to be out of it

This Thinksheet is a corrective to, & relief from, pressures on pastors to be into it, "it" being the world that some say "sets the agenda" for the church & its leaders.

I take you, please, to the year 1770, four years before the age-46 death of Oliver Goldsmith, whom his friend Sam. Johnson called "a great man." His best-known work is (in iambic pentameter) *The Deserted Village*, written after returning to his native Irish-Anglican place & finding it in ruins, a victim of the Industrial Revolution's "trade's unfeeling train," depopulating the countryside—sucking the rurals into the cities for jobs, expropriating the land for the luxuries of absentee landlords new-rich from the growth of capital since the formation of the Bank of England 76 years earlier (funding the mining of coal & iron, found in proximity in many areas of Britain).

That year, Wm. Blake (who parallelly complained of the "dark, satanic mills") was 13; & Hogarth was at work etching the horrors of the Revolution's downside, including human degradation: Goldsmith's third strophe begins "Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, / Where wealth accumulates and men decay."

Four years earlier, Goldsmith had published his other classic, the novel *THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD*, an idealization of rural family life, which I find reflected in the griefful fourth strophe of our poem: "A time there was, ere England's griefs began, / When every rood of ground maintained its man; / For him light labor spread her wholesome store, / Just gave what life required, but gave no more: / His best companions, innocence and health; / And his best riches, ignorance of wealth."

Contrast this sweet, sad **social criticism** with the sharp, mocking attacks of Jon. Swift (who died 25 year before, & who mordantly proposed that the English eat excess Irish babies); & with the pickwickian-twistian thrusts of Chas. Dickens (who was born 42 years after 1770).

What was it like to pastor in that village before the Revolution? We don't have to guess: our poem was written by the parson's son, Goldsmith himself. What it was like to pastor when the Revolution destroyed the village, the Rev. Mr. Goldsmith didn't live to know. Please read the poem at one sitting, asking yourself what in its light does it mean to pastor *now*, with the whole world blessed & devastated by the Revolution. And please keep 9/11 (another nostalgic act) in mind as you read--& the French Revolution (by the intelligentsia allied with the poor against the luxurious), 19 years after our poem (France being the second country to experience the Industrial Revolution).

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Now let's look at "the village preacher," who "was to all the country dear, / And passing rich with forty pounds [ca.\$200] a year," in the "modest" house (now a ruin) in which the poet grew up.

1 He was content, not bucking for a better (more lucrative) parish. "Remote from towns he ran his godly race, / Nor e'er had changed, nor wished to change, his place."

2 He did not tailor his teaching to the current fashion, didn't reject his nonconformist role. "Unpracticed he to fawn, or seek for power, / By doctrines fashioned to the varying hour."

3 He'd rather lift others than himself climb. "**Far other aims** his heart had learned to prize, / More skilled to raise the wretched than to rise."

4 His parsonage/vicarage was open to all, & the lowliest were greeted as heartily as the prominent. "His house was known to all the vagrant train."

5 He preached to the vagrant, but did more than preach: "He chid their wanderings, but relieved their pain." He remembered a "beggar" who'd knocked at his door, & he let him in again. "The ruined spendthrift, now no longer proud, / Claimed kindred there, and had his claims allowed." Asked to stay overnight, "the broken soldier.../...talked the night away."

6 In relating to people, his focus was on needs, not deserts. "Pleased with his guests, the good man learned to glow, / And quite forgot their vices in their woe;

/ Careless their merits or their faults to scan, / His pity gave ere charity began."

7 He was so good-hearted that even his shortcomings bent toward goodness. "Thus to relieve the wretched was his pride, / And e'en his failings leaned to virtue's side."

8 As a pastor, he was unfailingly duteous. "...in his duty prompt at every call, / He watched and wept, he prayed and felt for all."

9 He was ever eager to teach the gospel. "And as a bird each fond endearment tries / To tempt its new-fledged\*to the skies, / He tried each art, reproved each dull delay, / Allured to brighter worlds, and led the way." He walked his talk. \*offspring

10 His ministry to the dying did not stop at comfort, went on to praise. "....At his control, despair and anguish fled the struggling soul; / Comfort came down, the trembling wretch to raise, / And his last faltering accents whispered praise."

11 While he was in the world, sitting where the needy sat, he was **out of it** in the sense of not yielding to its blandishments & not overidentifying with the laity. "At church, with meek and unaffected grace, / His looks adorned the venerable place."

12 His preaching was forthright & devout. "Truth from his lips prevailed with double sway, / And fools, who came to scoff remained to pray." (Among preachers, the latter line is the poem's most-quoted.)

13 He was available to his people after public worship. "The service past, around the pious man, / With steady zeal, each honest rustic ran." Children "plucked his gown, to share the good man's smile."

14 He was fatherly whether or not addressed as "Father." "His ready smile a parent's warmth expressed; / Their welfare pleased him and their cares distressed."

15 He was secondarily people-oriented, primarily heaven-oriented (& in this sense also, **out of it**). "To them, his heart, his loves, his griefs were given, / But all his serious thoughts had rest in heaven." The section on the preacher (his own father, doubtless the model) ends with an unforgettable inkling of why the soul-hungry move toward the pastor who's "into" heaven: "As some tall cliff, that lifts its awful form, / Swells from the vale, and midway leaves the storm, / Though round its breast the rolling clouds are spread, / Eternal sunshine settles on its head."

Not too quick, please, to alibi that pastoring now is harder.

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