

## Consensus

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Volume 26

Issue 1 *The Baptismal Journey: Adventures on the River of Life*

Article 22

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5-1-2000

# The pastor as moral guide

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### Recommended Citation

O'Connor, Thomas St. James (2000) "The pastor as moral guide," *Consensus*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol26/iss1/22>

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## **The Pastor as Moral Guide**

Rebekah L. Miles

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999

135 pages

In an age of non-judgment in the pastoral relationship, Rebekah Miles advocates that pastors also utilize their gifts as moral guides. While Miles does not negate the importance of non-judgment, she also emphasizes that in the Christian congregation, people need help in making moral decisions. The pastor ought to be of help. Miles is an Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University. She articulates two ways of making moral decisions: by rules or by goals. In terms of rules, she utilizes the biblical record as well as teachers and writers in the Christian tradition. A decision made using rules examines what is right or virtuous out of a sense of duty. One made using goals, emphasizes increasing the love of God and discipleship. Goals can also include the need for some personal happiness. Miles focuses on three common issues where members of the congregation often need guidance: money and the meaning of work, marriage and divorce, sexual misconduct of the pastor. She utilizes many case examples that put flesh on her ethics.

The strengths of this book are many. Her emphasis on the pastor as moral guide is important and helpful. Her ethical thinking is clear and easy to follow despite her belief that ethics exists in the "muddled middle". She also has a pastoral presence that does not ignore the emotion of difficult situations. Sometimes, it is better to focus on the pain and the struggle of a crisis before one begins to decide what ought to be done. Here, her examples are very helpful. There is also an excellent description of the characteristics of a good guide that pastors ought to read daily. Miles also provides many suggestions for aiding people in both processing a moral decision and then implementing it.

Limitations of the book are few. One is little attention is given to forgiveness. Miles emphasizes an ethic of justice. Her thinking and moral reasoning are clear in seeking what is just in a pastoral situation. Here, she seems to be more in line with a Kantian perspective in following the rules and doing what is right out of duty. However, in a few of her case examples, I wanted her also to consider mercy and forgiveness. Are there unforgivable sins in moral theology? Is the misconduct of a pastor beyond forgiveness and mercy? Certainly, pastors (and everyone else) need to be accountable for their actions. However, who is not in need of mercy and forgiveness? I would have liked a little more discussion of these gospel qualities in making moral decisions. Also, I would have liked more emphasis on the development of ethical character as part of moral guidance. She hints at this in the characteristics of good moral guides but focuses more in

the book on the outcomes of moral decisions. Despite these limitations, I found the book excellent and a must read for pastors. I mark it 8.5 out of 10.

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## **Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson**

Mitch Albom

New York: Doubleday, 1997.

192 pages, \$31.95 Hardcover

*Tuesdays with Morrie* is the account of the last class taught by professor Morrie Schwartz and taken by one student, Mitch Albom. Reunited after sixteen years, the student and professor resume their Tuesday discussion sessions, with one difference: Morrie is dying from the debilitating disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease.

Morrie does not indulge in self-pity, nor does he invite sympathy from others. Rather, he counts himself lucky to be surrounded by loving family and friends, and to have been afforded the opportunity to live the dying process in such a way that he can share the insights learned from it with others. Death becomes Morrie's last project.

Albom describes Morrie as "standing on the tracks, listening to death's locomotive whistle", all the while being "very clear about the important things in life". Albom wants to know how this is possible, and if he, too, can possess such certainty. Morrie is glad to help.

Morrie invites Mitch to make a list of the issues which are important to him. Albom's list, which becomes the class syllabus, is universal: death, fear, aging, greed, marriage, family, society, forgiveness, a meaningful life. Mitch's narration of the classes is so personal that we are thrust right into the study with Morrie, discussing life's deeper issues, all the while helping Morrie in his painful yet inexorable death.

This is not a self-help book, nor a feel good book. Watching Morrie die is devastating and at times embarrassing. When asked what he dreaded most about his relentless disease, Morrie answered bluntly, "Losing the ability to wipe my ass." Who will not agree? We see this happen to Morrie, yet even this humiliation fails to get him down. "It's like going back to being a child again," Morrie philosophizes. "Someone to lift you. Someone to wipe you. We all know how to be a child. It's inside all of us. For me, it's just remembering how to enjoy it."