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PASTORING THE CHURCH AROUND THE CORNER:  
HOW PASTORS OF SMALL CHURCHES  
EVALUATE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS IN LIGHT OF  
DIVERGENT VIEWS OF SUCCESS

By

RONALD E. GONZALES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE  
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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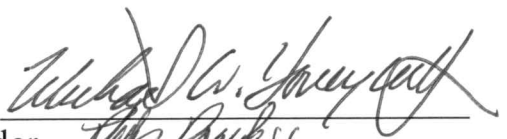
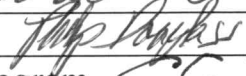

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## **ABSTRACT**

Small church pastors can easily grow discouraged when their churches fail to grow numerically. This study was done to explore how such pastors evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success.

The study began with a review of four areas of relevant literature: biblical-theological; Puritan notables and their spiritual descendants; twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors on the character and work of the pastor; and contemporary writers on leadership effectiveness. The study then employed a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews, in which eight ministers who have each pastored the same small church for seven or more years were asked to reflect on their experiences as they relate to pastoral effectiveness.

The study found both similarities and differences between the literature reviewed and the interviews conducted. The similarities included a recognition of the need for God's grace, the priority of preaching, the need for ministers to love God and those who belong to him, to walk with their sheep, to give oneself to evangelism and ministries of mercy, to be tentative in the evaluation of one's effectiveness, and to believe and rest in God's sovereignty. The differences included the priority of personal holiness and prayer, the place of suffering in ministry, and the importance of the sacraments and catechesis.

The study led to seven conclusions: pastoring a small church is difficult; God is in charge of outcomes; diligence and faithfulness must be a minister's aim; preaching must be accompanied by prayer; pastoral longevity is an asset to minister and congregation; a reward awaits faithful service; and pastoring a small congregation is a noble calling.

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Unless otherwise noted, all scripture citations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Text edition: 2007.



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In the age of the mega-church, when the largest ten percent of congregations in America are composed of approximately half of all churchgoers and the national mean of regular participants is 184, the national median stands at seventy-five. That is, half of all churches in America consist of seventy-five or fewer regular participants.<sup>1</sup> This statistic comes as no surprise to those who worship each week in small churches, but it often does, at least initially, to those who pastor them. For, as the National Congregations Study (NCS) found, “most seminarians come from large churches (since that’s where most people are), but most clergy jobs are in small churches.”<sup>2</sup>

This difference poses a challenge for ministers from such backgrounds, but they are not alone. Pastors who have left large, established churches to plant a new church or to revive a waning congregation often find that it is much harder than they expected. One pastor, describing his own experience, said,

I know you’re not supposed to be numbers conscious, but numbers do represent people. And when we were ministering to people, we felt our sacrifice was paying off; when no one was there, I wondered if it all was a waste and asked myself where I would go after I failed here...When you go from preaching to seven hundred, as I’d done in Virginia, to preaching to seven, you wonder if the hours of

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Chaves, Shawna Anderson, and Jason Byassee, "Report of the National Congregations Study: American Congregations at the Beginning of the 21st Century," (Duke University, June, 2009), 22. <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/> (accessed May 20, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 3.

study are worth it. And when four or five daydream through the service, your motivation vanishes.<sup>3</sup>

Such discouragement is common among pastors of small churches, for few enter the ministry aspiring to shepherd a congregation that remains small.

Fewer still would welcome the benediction that Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche Communities, pronounced upon Henri Nouwen when he was ordained to the priesthood and began his years of ministry among the severely disabled:

May all your expectations be frustrated.  
May all your plans be thwarted.  
May all your desires be withered into nothingness  
That you may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child  
And sing and dance in the love of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

Most pastors pray and work hard for just the opposite. They long for souls to be saved and for the church to grow. But numerical growth is God's prerogative, and those who forget that can easily grow disillusioned. Some even leave the ministry, supposing that a lack of growth means that they are ill-suited to such a calling.

Sometimes congregations come to the same conclusion. They let their pastors go, thinking they are not doing a good job and that a different minister will get a different result. But that is not necessarily true. As Pastor Eugene Peterson put it, both the defections by pastors and dismissals by churches are often based on "a cultural assumption that all leaders are people who 'get things done' and 'make things happen.'"<sup>5</sup>

So if the right things are not getting done, whether that means growth in numbers or

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<sup>3</sup> Marshall Shelley, "Double-Digit Churches: The Unique Struggles and Joys of Pastoring Congregations of Less Than a Hundred," *Leadership Journal* 4, no. 4 (1983): 43.

<sup>4</sup> J. R. Briggs, "Epic Fall: How Can Pastors Be Encouraged to Embrace Their Failures and Redefine Ministry Success?," *Leadership Journal* 33, no. 1 (2012): 88.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 5.

effective programming, it must be a problem with the leadership. Peterson continued, “That is certainly true of the primary leadership models that seep into our awareness from the culture—politicians, businessmen, advertisers, publicists, celebrities, and athletes.”<sup>6</sup> The sacred is viewed no differently than the secular.

Getting things done is what every pastor wants to do, and, whether rightly or wrongly motivated, those things are often influenced by the culture’s standards of success. For many, it is all about what one pastor called “the ABCs: attendance, buildings, and cash.”<sup>7</sup> When a church has these in abundance, or at least in growing measure, pastors tend to feel like a success. Pastor Max Lucado admitted as much: “I was taught to measure whether you’re a successful minister by footsteps and checkbooks, by the number of attenders at your church and the amount of money they give. So I’ve tended to take pride when we’ve done well and have been ashamed when we haven’t.”<sup>8</sup> To his credit, Lucado conceded the danger in using such measurements alone: “But I know there is more to it than that.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there is much more to it. Yet, for the pastor who hears few footsteps and whose church has very little in its checking account, it is easy to lose sight of that fact. And it is a small step from feeling disappointed in a seemingly insignificant ministry to believing that one is an insignificant pastor.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Briggs: 88.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall Shelley and Brian Larson, “The Applause of Heaven and Earth: An Interview with Max Lucado,” *Leadership Journal* 13, no. 3 (1992): 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Briggs: 87.

Thankfully, pastors are more open about such feelings today than they were a generation or two ago, in part because other ministers have been willing to write and talk about their struggles. Kent Hughes, the former senior pastor of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois, along with his wife Barbara, began the discussion in 1987 with their very honest book *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*. In it, Kent tells how early in his ministry he nearly succumbed to “the bitch goddess of success.”<sup>11</sup> Having been tabbed a rising star by the church he served as associate pastor, he was encouraged to plant a daughter church and given twenty families and a sizable endowment with which to start. “What a way to begin a church!” he writes. “Optimism ran high.”<sup>12</sup>

From the start, we had everything going for us. We had the prayers and predictions of our friends who believed a vast, growing work was inevitable. We had the sophisticated insights of the science of church growth. We had a superb nucleus of believers. And we had *me*, a young pastor with a good track record who was entering his prime. We expected to grow.<sup>13</sup>

It seemed like everything was perfect. Reality, however, took a much different course: “But to our astonishment and resounding disappointment, we didn’t [grow]. In fact, after considerable time and incredible labor, we had fewer regular attenders than during the first six months. Our church was shrinking, and the prospects looked bad—really bad.”<sup>14</sup> Kent’s experience mirrored the “getting things done or give up” model.

Like many pastors, this led to a crisis that nearly resulted in his leaving the ministry. That did not happen, though. Instead, he and Barbara began to search the

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<sup>11</sup> Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, New ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

scriptures to learn the true definition of success and failure in ministry. The result was their book, which has helped many pastors think biblically about the disappointments they face and the feelings of failure that often accompany them.

Others have written on the subject as well, confessing many of the same struggles and, ultimately, the same lessons learned. But it is worth noting that, like Kent Hughes's book, their books were written after their churches had experienced significant growth or after they had been called to serve larger congregations. And the few books that have been written by pastors who remain in small churches focus on strategies and techniques for maximizing such ministry, not on how the pastors embraced their calling and measure their effectiveness in it. There is a need to hear from such pastors on these questions, particularly from those who, because of conviction, have remained in small churches and faithfully served them for several years.

### **Problem Statement**

Median-sized churches in America consist of seventy-five regular attenders. They are served by solo pastors who bear the primary responsibility for the success or failure of the church. When churches fail to grow, ministers can easily become discouraged and question their effectiveness as pastors. Faced with this situation, ministers are tempted to give up, and when they do, churches suffer.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do pastors of small churches describe ministry effectiveness?
  - a. How do pastors of small churches describe ministry effectiveness in light of their ministry priorities?
  - b. How do pastors of small churches describe ministry effectiveness in light of their sense of call?
  - c. How do pastors of small churches describe ministry effectiveness in light of successful completion of goals?
2. How do pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness?
3. What do pastors of small churches think others expect of their ministry?
  - a. What do pastors of small churches think members expect of their ministry?
  - b. What do pastors of small churches think elders expect of their ministry?
4. How do the expectations of others affect the way pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness?

### **Significance of the Study**

As mentioned above, the NCS found that most clergy jobs are in small churches,<sup>15</sup> a fact that has not changed despite the proliferation of the mega-church. In fact, the 2009 report of the NCS, which was conducted in 2006-07, showed virtually no change from its

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<sup>15</sup> Chaves, Anderson, and Byassee, 3.

earlier study in 1998.<sup>16</sup> Small churches are here to stay, and that means there will be a continuing need for pastors to shepherd those congregations.

Unfortunately, far too many of those churches will suffer from a lack of pastoral longevity. In some cases this will occur because ministers will use the small church as a stepping stone to a larger congregation. In other cases ministers will grow discouraged by the lack of growth and problems that attend such ministries, and will give up. Either way, the health of small churches will be jeopardized, and in many cases the usefulness of gifted ministers will be lost.

To stem the tide of such losses, the church, and pastors in particular, must better understand the calling and ministry of those who have weathered the storms of small church ministry. Both need to hear and learn from those who have given their lives to such calls. And among the many things they need to learn is how small church pastors evaluate their ministries in light of such struggles. It is the researcher's hope that this study has served this purpose and will thereby strengthen Christ's church.

### **Definition of Terms**

Five terms that have been used thus far and will continue to be used throughout the study are deserving of definition. The first is the seemingly relative term "small church," which the NCS uses but never defines. Is a small church a church that mirrors the national median in regular participants, seventy-five, or might it include a congregation that boasts even greater attendance? For the purpose of this study, a small

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2.

church was defined as a congregation served by a solo pastor whose livelihood is derived from their ministerial labors.

Also needing definition is the term “regular participant,” which is also somewhat relative. Once again, the NCS uses the term but does not define it. While no doubt pastors long for their members to be in attendance every week, for the purpose of this research a regular participant was defined as a worshiper who attends weekly services at least half of the time.

Third, it has been suggested that both pastors and churches would benefit from listening to those who have served small churches for several years. By “several years,” this researcher means at least seven years and recognizes that those who have served the same congregation for longer have even more to offer.

The term “call,” as in pastoral call, also requires definition, for it does not refer to the conditions or stipulations of a pastor’s employment. Rather, the term was used to refer to the sense of God’s call or appointment to the particular church in which a pastor finds himself or herself.

Finally, since this study was intended to explore how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success, it is important that the reader understand what is meant by “pastoral effectiveness.” As the research showed, this term and its synonyms were defined in different ways by different authors and different ministers interviewed. Despite the variations, it was clear that each contributor had a goal or purpose in mind that, when accomplished, was proof of effectiveness. Pastoral



effectiveness, therefore, is the successful accomplishment of a goal or purpose as understood by each minister.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success. In order to understand how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success, four areas of literature were reviewed: biblical-theological; Puritan notables and their spiritual descendants, particularly those who pastored small churches; twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors on the character and work of the pastor in general and the challenges of small church ministry in particular; and contemporary writers on leadership effectiveness.

#### **Biblical-Theological**

The research questions that guided this study concerned how pastors of small churches describe and evaluate their ministry effectiveness and how they process the expectations others have of their ministries. The Bible does not directly answer these questions. It does, however, have much to say about the work of pastors in general and the character that is incumbent upon them. Taken together, the Bible's teaching on these issues provides a helpful perspective for those wrestling with such questions.

In this section five texts were considered that address the work and character of a pastor. Two come from the mouth of Jesus: Matthew 24:42-51 and John 21:15-22, and three from the pen of Paul: 1 Corinthians 4:1-4; 1 Timothy 4:6-16; and 2 Timothy 4:1-5.

### **Matthew 24:42-51**

In chapters twenty-four and twenty-five of Matthew, commonly called the Olivet Discourse, the Evangelist recounts Jesus' teaching concerning his second coming and the judgment that will follow, and the readiness he urged upon his followers because of it. Typical of Jesus' concern is the command with which Matthew 24:42-51 is introduced: "[S]tay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."<sup>17</sup> The command is followed by a parabolic saying in which Jesus likens the need for such vigilance to a homeowner who would have been better served had he prepared for an intruder: "if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into."<sup>18</sup> Hence the moral of the story: "you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."<sup>19</sup>

This call to readiness is then followed by a parable in which Christ's followers are likened to servants who are attentive to their master's business. Though not addressed specifically to pastors, the parable surely applies to them. For pastors, above all, are called to be "faithful and wise servant[s]" who set before God's people "their food at the proper time."<sup>20</sup> The word that is translated "servant," both here and throughout the parable, is *δοῦλος*, the word for a common slave; though in the parable the slave has been made ruler over the master's household to ensure that the needs of its members are met.

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew 24:42.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 24:43.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 24:44.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 24:45.

Seeing in this parable a picture of pastoral ministry, the Puritan Matthew Henry wrote, “Gospel ministers are appointed *rulers* in [God’s] household; not as princes...but as stewards, or other subordinate officers; not as lords, but as guides; not to prescribe new ways, but to show and lead in the ways that Christ has appointed.”<sup>21</sup> Gospel ministers, in other words, are rulers under Christ. They are concerned with advancing his kingdom, not their own. And they do so by feeding God’s people God’s truth, saying again what God has already said in his word, applying it to the lives of their hearers.

As they do, they must also take heed to their faithfulness, as both the question —“Who then is the faithful and wise servant?”<sup>22</sup>—and the benediction—“Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes”<sup>23</sup>—suggest. Indeed, in this regard, faithfulness is defined by one’s constancy (being at work when the master returns) and one’s perseverance (working until the master returns). As theologian R. T. France put it, “the readiness of the good slave consists not in sitting by the window watching for his master, but in getting on with the job he has been given.”<sup>24</sup> Faithful ministers are not lazy, they are hard working.

Interestingly, Luke’s version of this parable is occasioned by a question that Matthew omits, which underscores the parable’s relevance for those in pastoral ministry. Having said that there is no place for idleness and having spoken of the danger of his coming like a thief, Jesus is asked by Peter whether his words are intended for everyone

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, New Modern ed., 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 5:295.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew 24:45.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 24:46.

<sup>24</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 944.

or just for the Twelve.<sup>25</sup> Commenting on this, pastor and theologian John Calvin observed, “The object of Christ’s reply is that if any of the ordinary people should keep watch it is intolerable that the Apostles should be dozing...Sober and watchful attention is laid on all without distinction, but in the pastors lethargy is more shameful and less excusable.”<sup>26</sup> All of Christ’s followers are to be ready and faithful, but especially his ministers who have been entrusted with the care of the rest. They are to exercise particular diligence.

Also worthy of note is how the parable ends. Jesus does more than simply call his followers to readiness. He rouses their diligence with both a promise and a warning:

Truly, I say to you, [the master] will set him (i.e., the one who is ready and does the master’s will) over all his possessions. But if that wicked servant says to himself, “My master is delayed,” and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites.<sup>27</sup>

As Bishop J. C. Ryle said,

[I]n the day of the Lord’s return, there shall at length be a complete division...all shall be taken *as they are*, and reap according to what they have sown. Believers shall be caught up to glory, honour, and eternal life; unbelievers shall be left behind to shame and everlasting contempt. Blessed and happy are they who are of one heart in following Christ!<sup>28</sup>

What is true of Christ’s followers is also true of his ministers: diligence and faithfulness are cause for great reward; the opposite is cause for severe judgment.

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<sup>25</sup> Luke 12:41.

<sup>26</sup> John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke and the Epistles of James and Jude*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans., A. W. Morrison, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 107.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 24:47-51a.

<sup>28</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Matthew* (1856; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 327-28.

## **John 21:15-22**

The second text considered concerns Peter's restoration to apostolic ministry. Having vowed greater love for Jesus than the other disciples,<sup>29</sup> Peter failed on the night of Christ's arrest, denying him three times in the courtyard of the high priest.<sup>30</sup> Doubtless, he wondered whether he would ever be used again by the Savior, especially given that he had seen Jesus twice, if not three times, since his resurrection, and the Savior had said nothing about it. As Matthew Henry suggested, "We may suppose Peter full of doubts upon what terms he stood with his Master: sometimes hoping the best, because he had received favour from him in common with the rest; yet not without some fears, lest the chiding would come at last that would pay for all."<sup>31</sup> Peter's failure must have left him uncertain where he stood with Christ.

Yet, now the time had come. Having dined together, a token of reconciliation itself, Jesus confronted Peter with the thrice-repeated question, "Do you love me?" The first time the question was asked, the comparative "more than these"<sup>32</sup> was added, meaning "these other disciples," thereby probing to the depths Peter's superior love. Having made the point, the comparative was dropped after the first asking; but the

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew 26:33.

<sup>30</sup> Mark 14:66-72.

<sup>31</sup> Henry, 5:994.

<sup>32</sup> John 21:15.

question itself was put to Peter two more times, providing an opportunity for him to affirm the love for Christ he had denied, one affirmation for each denial.<sup>33</sup>

But more than merely an opportunity for Peter to reaffirm his love for Christ, this exchange was the means by which Christ recommissioned Peter, setting him apart once again for gospel ministry. Hence the three-fold command: “Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep.”<sup>34</sup> Three times Christ committed the care of his flock to Peter. From this, Matthew Henry drew an important lesson for all who would shepherd God’s flock: “It is the duty of all Christ’s ministers to feed his lambs and sheep...that is, teach them; for the doctrine of the gospel is spiritual food...[and] lead them to the green pastures, presiding in their religious assemblies, and ministering all the ordinances to them.”<sup>35</sup> The sheep belong to Christ; his ministers must make sure they are well fed.

Equally significant are the questions Christ does not ask Peter. Henry continued: “[H]e does not ask, ‘Dost thou fear me? Dost thou honour me? Dost thou admire me?’ but ‘Dost thou love me?’...[T]he question is not, ‘Simon, how much has thou wept? how often hast thou fasted, and afflicted thy soul?’ but, Dost thou love me?”<sup>36</sup> It is love for

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<sup>33</sup> Some see a significance in the words for “love” used by Jesus and Peter in verses 15-17. In the first two questions Jesus uses *ἀγαπάω*, the Greek verb for loyal or sacrificial love, typically used to describe the love of God; whereas Peter, in all three responses, uses *φιλέω*, the Greek verb for affection based on association, usually thought to be a lesser love than *ἀγαπάω*. In the third question, however, Jesus changes from *ἀγαπάω* to *φιλέω*, which some take as a condescending to Peter’s inability to affirm anything more than mere affection. Such an interpretation, however, makes too much of the change in vocabulary, for at least two reasons. First, in John’s Gospel, the two verbs are used synonymously; there is no evidence that one represents a higher or lower form of love. John, for example, often refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” sometimes using *ἀγαπάω* (13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20) and sometimes *φιλέω* (20:2). What is more, both verbs are used in John to describe the love of the Father for the Son (*ἀγαπάω* in 5:35; *φιλέω* in 5:20), as well as Jesus’ love for Lazarus (*φιλέω* in 11:3; *ἀγαπάω* in 11:5). Second, according to verse 17, what grieved Peter was not Jesus’ choice of verbs, but the fact that Jesus asked the question a third time, reminding Peter of his three-fold denial.

<sup>34</sup> John 21:15, 16, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 5:995.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 5:994.

Christ, not assurances of utter remorse and the promise of unwavering faithfulness, that make expressions of repentance acceptable to God. Furthermore, as J. C. Ryle said, no doubt with Peter in mind, “It is not loud talk and high profession; it is not even impetuous, spasmodic zeal, and readiness to draw the sword and fight,—it is steady, patient, laborious effort to do good to Christ’s sheep...which is the best evidence of being a true-hearted disciple.”<sup>37</sup> What is true of a true-hearted disciple is also true of true-hearted pastors: they love Christ and care for his sheep.

In recommissioning Peter, Jesus also revealed his heart for the sheep and the motivation of those suited to care for them, particularly when difficulties come.

Concerning this, Matthew Henry wrote:

Christ has such a tender regard to his flock that he will not trust it with any but those that love him, and therefore will love all that are his for his sake. Those that do not truly love Christ will never truly love the souls of men, or will naturally care for their state as they should; nor will that minister love his work that does not love his Master. Nothing but the love of Christ will constrain ministers to go cheerfully through the difficulties and discouragements they meet with in their work.<sup>38</sup>

For Peter, difficulty would abound, as the words that followed his recommissioning make plain: “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.”<sup>39</sup> The phrase “stretch out your hands” was understood in the ancient world to refer to crucifixion.<sup>40</sup> John,

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<sup>37</sup> J. C. Ryle, *John*, vol. 3 (1873; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 500.

<sup>38</sup> Henry, 5:994.

<sup>39</sup> John 21:18.

<sup>40</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 679.



writing much later and with the advantage of hindsight, confirms this in his parenthetical thought, “(This [Jesus] said to show by what kind of death [Peter] was to glorify God.)”<sup>41</sup> Peter, in other words, lived and ministered for the next thirty years under the shadow of the Lord’s prediction, well aware that one day he would be arrested and crucified. Nevertheless, his assignment was clear: “after saying this [Jesus] said to him, ‘Follow me.’”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, not even the inequity of his fellow being spared martyrdom was to dissuade Peter from fulfilling his calling: “If it is my will that [John] remain until I come,” Jesus said, “what is that to you? You follow me!”<sup>43</sup>

### **1 Corinthians 4:1-4**

The third text considered comes from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, a church Paul planted during his second missionary journey, which had subsequently come under the influence of other gifted teachers. The result was a division within the church that centered around preferred personalities: Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and so forth.<sup>44</sup> In chapter three Paul called such divisions evidence of spiritual immaturity,<sup>45</sup> but he did not stop at that. In addressing the divisions that were tearing the church apart, he went on to correct several misconceptions regarding true Christian leadership. In doing so, theologian D. A. Carson wrote, Paul “had to disabuse his readers of the evil in their

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<sup>41</sup> John 21:19a.

<sup>42</sup> John 21:19b.

<sup>43</sup> John 21:22.

<sup>44</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:11-12; 3:4.

<sup>45</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:1.

tendency to lionize certain Christian leaders and ignore others.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, they needed to understand how to think of their leaders and what the true nature of spiritual leadership is. Hence Paul’s words: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.”<sup>47</sup>

As Pastor David Roper said, “Here Paul defines his two-fold task and, by extrapolation, the task of all who serve the church. This is ministry, stripped to its bare essentials: We are *servants* of Christ and *stewards* of the secrets of God.”<sup>48</sup> The word Paul used for “servants” is not *διάκονος*, the usual New Testament term, but *ὑπηρέτης*, which, according to Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon, means “a rower,”<sup>49</sup> or literally, an “under-rower,” since the noun is a compound of *ἐρέτης*. The term was originally used to refer to the slaves who pulled the oars in ancient, seagoing vessels, which led Roper to conclude that Paul was saying that ministers

...are mere under-rowers...seated down below decks in the lower seats, pulling on [their] own oar with all the other folks. [They are] not up on top; that’s the Captain’s place. [They] set neither the course nor the cadence. It’s His task to determine the heading and call the stroke...The direction a church goes, the speed with which it develops, and the size to which it grows are His prerogatives. [The minister’s] job is to fix [his] eyes on Christ and row.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 93.

<sup>47</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:1-2.

<sup>48</sup> David Roper, *A Burden Shared: Encouragement for Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1991), 134.

<sup>49</sup> H. G. Liddle and Robert Scott, *A Lexicon, Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), 736.

<sup>50</sup> Roper, 134-35.

Though there is dispute over whether *ὑπηρέτης* should be so translated in the New Testament,<sup>51</sup> the word picture suggested by its origin is helpful in understanding Paul's point: ministers are subservient to Christ; they take their cue from him.

Ministers, however, are not only "servants of Christ," they are also "stewards of the mysteries of God." In Paul's day, a steward was a household administrator or butler, whose responsibility it was to go to the pantry each day and bring out food for the family. This is how Paul saw himself and all who lead the church; as dispensers of the secret things of God. As Calvin put it, ministers "hand over to men...not what suits their own taste, but what the Lord has committed to their charge."<sup>52</sup> That is, they bring forth from the Master's pantry nourishing things on which others can feed.

This, then, is how ministers should be regarded: as servants who keep their eyes fixed on Christ, and stewards who feed God's flock out of the storehouse of his heavenly wisdom. Merely understanding this, however, is not enough. As New Testament scholar Gordon Fee said, "What is sought in 'stewards' is faithfulness, that they be trustworthy (in the true sense of the word: 'worthy of the trust that has been placed in their care'). Not eloquence, nor wisdom (nor 'initiative,' nor 'success'...), but faithfulness to the trust, is what God requires of his servants."<sup>53</sup> Christ's ministers are to faithfully give themselves to this calling. And, as Roper said,

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<sup>51</sup> Karl Heinrich Rengstorff, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8, 533, questions the etymology of *ὑπηρέτης*, since there is no historical evidence that the lowest level of a ship was made up of *ὑπηρέται*. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the *ὑπηρέτης* had a superior when he acted as a rower and had to row according to his superior's directions.

<sup>52</sup> John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans., John W. Fraser, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 84-85.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 160.

Faithfulness suggests a dogged refusal to fold in the face of criticism, boredom, or difficulty. Every good endeavor gets hard, usually at the point where our dreams give way to actual doing. That's when we want to lay down our oars and jump ship. But that's when we must be found in our places, patiently waiting on our Lord and serving His people.<sup>54</sup>

Christ's ministers are to be faithful, no matter how the sheep respond.

Additionally, according to Paul, the faithful minister is concerned primarily with God's assessment: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court."<sup>55</sup> The judgment of others guarantees nothing. Indeed, Paul did not even trust his own self-assessment: "I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted."<sup>56</sup> The conscience is far from foolproof; it is easy to be self-deceived when examining one's life. Hence Paul's conclusion, "It is the Lord who judges me."<sup>57</sup> On the last day, Christ's "Well done, thou good and faithful servant"<sup>58</sup> is the only one that matters.

### **1 Timothy 4:6-16**

The fourth text considered comes from Paul's First Letter to Timothy, the young apprentice he left in Ephesus to pastor the church he had planted there. Ephesus would have been a difficult assignment for any minister, given the presence of the false teachers

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<sup>54</sup> Roper, 136.

<sup>55</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:3a.

<sup>56</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:3b-4a.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:4b.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew 25:21 (Authorized Version).

that had infiltrated the church since Paul's departure; but it was particularly difficult for Timothy, because of his age,<sup>59</sup> temperament,<sup>60</sup> and weak constitution.<sup>61</sup>

Having warned Timothy in chapter one of the danger of false teachers, in chapters two and three Paul urged Timothy and the church to pray and to make sure that the elders and deacons chosen to lead the church were men of godly, proven character. Then, in chapter four Paul offered some advice to Timothy personally. In contrast to the false teachers, who had been deceived by Satan and were deceiving others, Paul urged Timothy to make the truth known, while guarding his own life and doctrine: "If you put these things (i.e., the truth about God's free grace) before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus...Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness."<sup>62</sup> These "silly myths," as verse three suggests, consisted, at least in part, in the asceticism the false teachers were promoting: forbidding marriage and advocating abstinence from certain foods. This, they believed, was how one pleased God. But, as Paul went on to say, "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer."<sup>63</sup> Asceticism is not the way to please God, especially when the things being denied are God's gracious gifts to mankind.

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<sup>59</sup> 1 Timothy 4:12.

<sup>60</sup> 2 Timothy 1:7.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Timothy 5:23.

<sup>62</sup> 1 Timothy 4:6-7.

<sup>63</sup> 1 Timothy 4:4-5.

Moreover, asceticism has nothing to do with genuine godliness, which Timothy was urged to pursue. The command, “train yourself for godliness”<sup>64</sup> is literally, “train yourself to be godly.” The verb used here is the Greek *γυμνάζω*, which means “to exercise” or “to discipline.” Explaining the sense of this imperative, Gordon Fee said, “Paul’s point is that, like the athlete, Timothy should keep himself in vigorous training for the practice of genuine godliness, understood here as both the content of the truth and its visible expression in correct behavior.”<sup>65</sup> Timothy, in other words, was to exercise himself in the truth of the gospel and to live out of that truth.

Right thinking and right living, however, were not enough. Timothy was also to impart the truth to others: “Command and teach these things,”<sup>66</sup> Paul said. Given the circumstances, this was logical advice. But, as Pastor John Stott said, it was complicated by another factor:

Timothy had been called to Christian leadership beyond his years. Perhaps some people were jealous of Timothy; they resented his having been promoted over their heads. Others simply looked down their noses at this pretentious youth, much as Goliath despised young David. It is a perennial problem...How then should young Christian leaders react in this situation...? Not by boastful, assertive or aggressive behaviour. Not by throwing their weight around and trying to impose their will. *But...by different means altogether.*<sup>67</sup>

Paul identifies those means in the imperatives that follow: “set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity...devote yourself to the public reading of

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<sup>64</sup> 1 Timothy 4:7.

<sup>65</sup> Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 103.

<sup>66</sup> 1 Timothy 4:11.

<sup>67</sup> John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 119.

Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”<sup>68</sup> Timothy was to focus on his personal life and his ministry, with the former concurring with the latter. Timothy’s example was to be comprehensive; he was to model Christian virtue, and to do so before everyone. He was also to commit himself to the public ministry of the word—reading it, teaching it, and exhorting from it—for therein lay his authority as a minister. Indeed, to follow such advice was nothing less than the faithful use of the gift God had given him, affirmed by both prophetic word and the commissioning he had received through the presbyters’ hands.<sup>69</sup> God had set Timothy apart for gospel ministry; he needed to remember and to remind others of this fact.

Paul, then, summed up the charge and added an incentive: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”<sup>70</sup> Calvin, commenting on Paul’s summation, said,

A good pastor must be careful about two things: to be diligent in his teaching and to keep his own integrity. It is not enough that he should rule his life by all that is honourable and take care not to give a bad example, if he does not add to a sanctified life a continual diligence in teaching. And teaching will be of little worth if there is not a corresponding uprightness and holiness of life. Thus Paul has good reason to urge Timothy to give heed both to himself personally and to his teaching for the general advantage of the Church.<sup>71</sup>

Regarding the incentive, Calvin was also helpful:

It is indeed true that it is God alone who saves and not even the smallest part of His glory can rightly be transferred to men. But God’s glory is in no way

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<sup>68</sup> 1 Timothy 4:12-13.

<sup>69</sup> 1 Timothy 4:14.

<sup>70</sup> 1 Timothy 4:16.

<sup>71</sup> John Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans., T. A. Smail, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 248.

diminished by His using the labour of men in bestowing salvation. Thus our salvation is the gift of God, since it comes from Him alone and is effected only by His power, so that He alone is its Author. But that does not exclude the ministry of men, nor does it deny that that ministry may be the means of salvation, for it is on that ministry that, as Paul says elsewhere, the welfare of the Church depends (Eph. 4.11)...If a good pastor is in this way the salvation of those who hear him, let bad and careless men know that their ruin will be ascribed to those who are set over them. For just as the salvation of his flock is a pastor's crown, so all that perish will be required at the hand of careless pastors.<sup>72</sup>

Empowered by the Spirit and blessed by God, pastors who guard themselves and their teaching make a difference.

## **2 Timothy 4:1-5**

The fifth text considered comes from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, the apostle's last recorded words before his death. Tradition has it that within weeks of his writing this letter, Paul was beheaded on the Ostian Way.<sup>73</sup> Paul may well have expected such an outcome, for the body of the letter ends with the words, "the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."<sup>74</sup>

These words were no doubt meant to inspire Timothy, Paul's apostolic delegate and representative in Ephesus. The letter itself is filled with imperatives, all having to do with guarding the gospel and being willing to suffer for it. But in chapter four, Paul's

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 248-49.

<sup>73</sup> John Stott, *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 105.

<sup>74</sup> 2 Timothy 4:6b-8.



conclusion, the apostle issues the solemn charge: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”<sup>75</sup>

The charge begins with the primacy of preaching, which Gordon Fee referred to as “the rubric”<sup>76</sup> for all the commands that follow. As John Stott said, “[Timothy’s] responsibility is not just to hear [the word], and to believe and obey what he hears; nor just to guard it from every falsification; nor just to suffer for it and continue in it; but...to preach it to others.”<sup>77</sup> Timothy’s call, above all else, was to herald the good news, to proclaim the message of the gospel.

The manner in which Timothy was to preach is explained in the verbs that follow in rapid succession: “reprove, rebuke, and exhort.” These verbs suggest, as Stott said,

...three different ways of doing it...He must “use argument, reproof and appeal” (NEB), which is almost a classification of the three approaches, intellectual, moral and emotional. For some people are tormented by doubts and need to be convinced by arguments. Others have fallen into sin, and need to be rebuked. Others again are haunted by fears, and need to be encouraged.<sup>78</sup>

God’s word does all of these things; it is “profitable” for a variety of uses, as Paul said earlier in the letter.<sup>79</sup> It is, therefore, incumbent upon ministers to know how to apply it to the lives of their hearers.

The command to preach is also qualified by the imperative, “be ready in season and out of season,” which the Authorized Version translated, “be instant in season, out of

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<sup>75</sup> 2 Timothy 4:2.

<sup>76</sup> Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 284.

<sup>77</sup> Stott, *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy*, 106.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 107-08.

<sup>79</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16.

season,” stressing the urgency of the call and, therefore, the earnestness with which it must be made. As Puritan Richard Baxter counseled pastors,

[L]et the people see that you are in good earnest... You cannot break men’s hearts by jesting with them, or telling them a smooth tale, or patching up a gaudy oration. Men will not cast away their dearest pleasures upon a drowsy request of one that seemeth not to mean as he speaks, or to care much whether his request be granted.<sup>80</sup>

Explicit in this qualification is also a readiness to preach, no matter the hindrances in doing so. Calvin said, “by these words [Paul] commands not merely perseverance but even aggressiveness in overcoming all hindrances and difficulties; for being by nature timid and slothful we easily give way before the very smallest hindrances and sometimes we even welcome them as excuses for our laziness.”<sup>81</sup> No matter the source, hindrances are never justification for indolence.

Neither are hindrances an excuse for insensitivity or rudeness; for the command to preach is further qualified by the phrase, “with complete patience and teaching.”

Although ministers are called to be urgent in making proclamation, they are to conduct themselves with unfailing patience toward others, explaining the truth as clearly as they are able, but depending on God to work in the hearts of men and women, rather than on their own powers of persuasion. This is all the more important, given Paul’s description of the character of man and the nature of the age: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the

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<sup>80</sup> Richard Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus: The Reformed Pastor*, ed. John T. Wilkinson, Second ed. (London: The Epworth Press, 1955), 145.

<sup>81</sup> Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 333.

truth and wander off into myths.”<sup>82</sup> This was true in Paul’s day and has been true ever since. Apart from the work of the Spirit, people cannot bear the truth; they prefer their own “passions” and “myths.” They gladly substitute their notions and whims for God’s revelation.

Hence Paul’s conclusion: “As for you [Timothy], always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”<sup>83</sup> By “sober-minded,” Paul means, in control of oneself. As Fee said, “The people will go after anything because they have ‘itching ears,’ but [Timothy] must keep on the alert so as not to be taken in.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, if need be, Timothy was to bear the ill-treatment of those who rejected his message. But regardless of the response, he was to fulfill his appointed task; he was to do the work of an evangelist, which is the work with which this charge began, the work to which every minister is called.<sup>85</sup> He was to “preach the word.”

### **Puritan Notables and Their Spiritual Descendants**

The second area of literature explored was Puritan notables and their spiritual descendants. Puritan pastors were non-conformists and, therefore, often suffered at the hands of the state church. Such suffering explains, in part, why so many of them served small congregations. The Puritan Samuel Rutherford, for example, pastored the tiny village church at Anwoth, in southwest Scotland, a church that was as unremarkable as it was small. His appointment to this charge surprised those familiar with his giftedness and

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<sup>82</sup> 2 Timothy 4:3-4.

<sup>83</sup> 2 Timothy 4:5.

<sup>84</sup> Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, 286.

<sup>85</sup> Stott, *Guard the Gospel: The Message of 2 Timothy*, 106.

intellectual prowess. “His talents and his industry while he was a student in Edinburgh had carried him to the top of his class.”<sup>86</sup> One might have expected Rutherford to be entrusted with a larger see; but, like so many others, he was appointed to a small congregation and for nine years served it faithfully.

Thankfully, the influence of these pastors was not limited by the size of their congregations. Their sermons and treatises on theology, the Christian life, and pastoral ministry were published broadly and read by many in their day. As with the Bible, most of their treatises do not directly answer the questions that guided this research; though even a cursory reading of them reveals that they, too, have much to say about the character and work of those called to pastoral ministry. It is to these that we now turn.

### **The Pastor’s Character**

A minister’s character was of highest importance to Puritan pastors. “Value the character of a good man in all the parts of your employment,” wrote the Reverend Andrew Fuller, “and, above all, in those things which the world counts great and estimable.”<sup>87</sup> To the Puritans, character was even more important than intellect and giftedness. Fuller continued,

Value it above mental greatness, or greatness in gifts and part. It is not wrong to cultivate gifts; on the contrary, it is our duty so to do. But, desirable as these are, they are not to be compared with goodness...If we improve in gifts and not in grace, to say the least, it will be useless, and perhaps dangerous, both to ourselves and others. To improve in gifts, that we may be the better able to discharge our work is laudable; but if it be for the sake of popular applause, we may expect a

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<sup>86</sup> Alexander Whyte, *Samuel Rutherford and Some of His Correspondents* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1894), 3-4.

<sup>87</sup> Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, Reprinted from the third London edition (no date cited), revised, with additions, by Joseph Belcher, 3 vols. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 1:136.

blast. Hundreds of ministers have been ruined by indulging a thirst for the character of the *great* man, while they have neglected the far superior character of the *good* man.<sup>88</sup>

With this sentiment, Puritan pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards heartily agreed. “It is the excellency of a minister of the gospel to be both a burning and a shining light,”<sup>89</sup> Edwards said, by which he meant, one who possessed great warmth and a holy zeal for God and man, both of which emanate from one’s character.

Puritan pastors delineated a minister’s character in no less than eight areas: devotion to Christ, the pursuit of holiness, dependence upon grace, the protection of one’s heart, love for the sheep, a willingness to suffer, faithfulness to the call, and a commitment to hard work. These, they said, were the areas in which true pastoral character is evidenced.

### *Devotion to Christ*

By devotion to Christ, the Puritans were thinking of more than that which is incumbent upon every Christian: to please and glorify God. It included that, but did not stop there. According to Richard Baxter, the minister is also called “to the glorification of his Church,” that is, to “the sanctification and holy obedience of the people of our charge, their unity, order, beauty, strength, preservation and increase, and the right worshipping of God, especially in the solemn assemblies.”<sup>90</sup> It is a tall order, to be sure, which led Baxter to conclude that it must spring from a love for God:

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 1:138.

<sup>89</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (1834; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 956.

<sup>90</sup> Baxter, 72-73.

That man...that is not himself taken up with the predominant love of God is not himself devoted to Him; and doth not devote to him all that he hath or can do; that man that is not addicted to the pleasing God, and making Him the centre of all his actions, and living to Him as his God and happiness; that is, that man that is not a sincere Christian himself, is utterly unfit to be a pastor of a Church.<sup>91</sup>

Moreover, such love for God and devotion to Christ must exceed all earthly treasures, for the latter pale in comparison to the former. Hence Baxter also said, “No man is fit to be a pastor of a Church that doth not set his heart on the life to come, and regard the matters of everlasting life, above all the matters of this present life.”<sup>92</sup> The present world is passing away; the one to come is eternal. Christian ministers must know and believe this, and live accordingly, if they are to help others grow in their devotion to Christ.

### *The Pursuit of Holiness*

Devotion to Christ and to his bride, however, is only the start. The Puritans also said that a longing for or delighting in holiness is required of every minister of the gospel. Baxter wrote, “He that delighteth not in holiness, hateth not iniquity, loveth not the unity and purity of the Church, and abhorreth not discord and divisions, and taketh not pleasure in the communion of saints and the public worship of God with His people, is not fit to be a pastor of a Church.”<sup>93</sup> And, of course, such holiness must be genuine. If it is not, it will be obvious, at least to the minister, in the hypocrisy found in his or her life. The Puritan John Newton understood this. Indeed, he recognized that it was a common problem among pastors. In a letter to fellow ministers, he wrote,

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

Sometimes, perhaps, you will feel such an amazing difference between the frame of your spirit in public and in private, when the eyes of men are not upon you, as will make you almost ready to conclude that you are no better than an hypocrite, a mere stage-player, who derives all his pathos and exertion from the sight of the audience. At other times you will find such a total emptiness and indisposition of mind, that former seasons of liberty in preaching will appear to you like the remembrance of a dream, and you will hardly be able to persuade yourself you shall ever be capable of preaching again.<sup>94</sup>

Puritan pastors knew that they were sinners, yet they expected sincerity and integrity of themselves and of their fellow ministers, for they understood that they had been called to set an example of faith and godliness for those whom they led, and that a congregation will generally aspire to no greater holiness than it sees in its pastor.

### *Dependence Upon Grace*

Growth in grace is what every pastor needs, grace upon grace for the challenges that attend pastoral ministry, and certainly no less so for its success. “Eminency in grace,” wrote Andrew Fuller, “will contribute to your success in three ways...it will fire your souls with holy love to Christ and the souls of men..., [it] will direct your ends to the glory of God, and the welfare of men’s souls..., [and it] will enable you to bear prosperity in your ministry without being lifted up with it.”<sup>95</sup> Grace is what ministers most need; though if they fail to recognize it, they are inclined to depend on themselves instead, which the Puritans were adamantly against. “Our whole work,” Baxter wrote, “must be carried on under a deep sense of our own insufficiency, and of our entire dependence on Christ. We must go for light, and life, and strength to him, who sends us on the work.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> John Newton, *Select Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 51.

<sup>95</sup> Fuller, 1:143-44.

<sup>96</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1862; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 122.

Only Christ is adequate to the task to which ministers are called. They must depend upon him for all that they and their people need.

*The Protection of One's Heart*

Puritan pastors, perhaps more than anything else, were aware of the spiritual hazards that so easily beset ministers. They, therefore, urged the protection of one's heart.

As Baxter put it,

Take heed to yourselves for you have sinful inclinations as well as others...In us there is at the best, remnants of pride, unbelief, self-seeking, hypocrisy, and all the most hateful, deadly sins. Alas! how weak are those who seem strongest! How apt to stumble at a very straw! How small a matter will cast us down, by enticing us to folly; or kindling our passions and inordinate desires, by perverting our judgments or abating our resolutions, and cooling our zeal, and dulling our diligence!<sup>97</sup>

Andrew Fuller agreed. "Watch over your own soul," he said. "Know your own weaknesses...Be often looking to the end of your course, and viewing yourself as giving an account of your stewardship. We must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ."<sup>98</sup>

Pastors are just as vulnerable to temptation and sin as are those over whom God has placed them. Hence those who tend God's flock must first tend their own hearts. As Puritan William Perkins said, "He must be godly affected himself who would stir up godly affections in other men."<sup>99</sup> Indeed, apart from doing so, ministers are of little benefit to their congregations. Baxter, himself, admitted to this:

I confess I must speak it by lamentable experience, that I publish to my flock the distempers of my soul. When I let my heart go cold, my preaching is cold;...and

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<sup>97</sup> Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus: The Reformed Pastor*, 163-64.

<sup>98</sup> Fuller, 1:144.

<sup>99</sup> Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1986), 93.



so I can oft observe also in the best of my hearers that when I have grown cold in preaching, they have grown cold too; and the next prayers which I have heard from them have been too like my preaching...O brethren, watch therefore over your own hearts: keep out lusts and passions, and worldly inclinations; keep up the life of faith, and love, and zeal: be much at home, and much with God.<sup>100</sup>

Baxter was not alone. Many Puritan pastors reported the same experience and urged the same antidote.

Many also addressed the dangers of pride, to which ministers are particularly vulnerable. On this, Newton colorfully said,

While human nature remains in its present state, there will be almost the same connection between popularity and pride, as between fire and gunpowder: they cannot meet without an explosion, at least not unless the gunpowder is kept very damp. So unless the Lord is constantly moistening our hearts (if I may so speak) by the influences of his Spirit, popularity will soon set us in a blaze.<sup>101</sup>

Baxter reflected on the danger of pride in the ministry, as well:

One of the most heinous and palpable sins is *pride*—a sin that hath too much interest in the best, but is more hateful and inexcusable in us than in any man. Yet it is so prevalent in some of us, that it inditeth our discourses for us: it chooseth our company, it governeth our countenances, it putteth the accents and emphasis upon our words; when we reason it is the determiner and exciter of our cogitations; it fills some men's minds with aspiring desires and designs; it possesseth them with envious and bitter thoughts against those that stand in their light, or by any means do eclipse their glory, or hinder the progress of their idolised reputation. O what a constant companion, what a tyrannical commander, what a sly, subtle and insinuating enemy is the sin of pride!<sup>102</sup>

So subtle is pride, it even finds its way into the pulpit:

When pride hath made the sermon, it goes with [ministers] into the pulpit; it formeth their tone, it animateth them in the delivery, it takes them off from that which may be displeasing, how necessary soever, and setteth them in a pursuit of

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<sup>100</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 279.

<sup>101</sup> Newton, 50.

<sup>102</sup> Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus: The Reformed Pastor*, 95.

vain applause: and the sum of all this is, that it maketh them, both in studying and preaching, to seek themselves, and deny God, when they should seek God's glory, and deny themselves.<sup>103</sup>

Pride is a dangerous thing. Pastors must guard their hearts against it and every other sin that seeks to undo them and, through them, the church of God.

### *Love for the Sheep*

Puritan pastors also believed that ministers should follow Christ's example of loving men's souls. "If we be true ministers of Christ," Andrew Fuller wrote, "we shall love the souls of men as he loved them."<sup>104</sup> Jonathan Edwards agreed: "[Ministers] should follow [Christ's] example of love to souls: though it be impossible that they should love them to so great a degree, yet they should have the same spirit of love to them, and concern for their salvation, according to their capacity."<sup>105</sup> Moreover, such love, if it be like Christ's, must be selfless. For, as Edwards went on to say, "Love to men's souls in Christ was far above any regard he had to his temporal interest, his ease, his honour, his meat and drink; and so it should be with his ministers."<sup>106</sup> Jesus is the model for all who would shepherd God's flock. With little if any self-concern, he laid down his life for the sheep. So must those who follow in his footsteps.

### *A Willingness to Suffer*

As mentioned above, several Puritan pastors suffered because of their non-conformist views. The Puritan John Bunyan, for example, was subjected to the repressive

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>104</sup> Fuller, 1:543.

<sup>105</sup> Edwards, 962.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

measures of the royalists after the Restoration of 1660, and spent the better part of the next twelve years in the Bedford jail.<sup>107</sup> Samuel Rutherford was prosecuted before the High Commission for his rigidly Calvinistic writings, which resulted in him being deposed and exiled to Aberdeen for two years. Later, after a period of freedom and much usefulness to God's kingdom, his treatise *Lex Rex, a Dispute for the Just Prerogative of King and People* was publicly burned and Rutherford was charged with high treason. He died shortly afterwards, before he could be brought to trial.<sup>108</sup>

These are but two examples of the suffering that was so common during the Puritan era. Add to this the pain that all ministers feel as they walk with their sheep through the difficulties of life, and it is no wonder that Andrew Fuller said to those wanting to be pastors, "Endure afflictions. If you cannot bear these, you had better let the ministry alone. If you be good ministers of Jesus Christ, you will not only be afflicted in common with others, but the afflictions of others will become yours."<sup>109</sup> Pastoral ministry, in other words, is exceedingly difficult; it is fraught with pain and hardship.

### *Faithfulness to the Call*

Such difficulties make ministerial faithfulness all the more necessary. Pastor Thomas Boston, in a sermon he preached to fellow ministers at the Synod of Merse and Teviotdale, said,

Has Jesus Christ promised his presence to his servants in their work? Let us, then, my fathers and brethren, cleave to our great work, to which we are called of the Lord. Let us steadfastly pursue the ends of our ministry, the advancing of the

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<sup>107</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Third ed., s.v. "Bunyan, John".

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, s.v. "Rutherford, Samuel".

<sup>109</sup> Fuller, 1:519.

kingdom of Christ, and the pulling down the kingdom of Satan, according to the commission we have from our Lord and Master. Let us follow our work faithfully, over the belly of all discouragement and opposition which we may meet with in it.<sup>110</sup>

Faithfulness, no matter what: that was the Puritan watchword, for Puritan ministers understood that they served God rather than man. As Boston said on another occasion, “If the fear of the Lord be not on our spirits, to counterbalance the fear of men, we cannot avoid being ensnared in unfaithfulness. But a heart exercised to godliness, will lead us on to act, as in the sight of God, whether in public or in private, that no souls perish through our default.”<sup>111</sup> Indeed, Puritan ministers understood that theirs was a sacred call, that their time was short, and that soon they and their congregations would stand before the judge of all the earth. “We are dying ministers,” Boston said, “preaching to dying people. Other persons will shortly get our pulpits, and our seats. Let this be our joint exercise while we live, and then we will not be afraid to die.”<sup>112</sup> Faithfulness was the life and breath of Puritan pastors.

#### *A Commitment to Hard Work*

Finally, Puritan pastors practiced and urged ministerial diligence and hard work. The Reverend John Flavel wrote, “The labours of the ministry will exhaust the very marrow from your bones, hasten old age and death. They are fitly compared to the toil of men in harvest, to the labours of a woman in travail, and to the agonies of soldiers in the

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas Boston, *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston, Ettrick: Including His Memoirs, Written by Himself*, vol. 9 (1853; reprint, Wheaton, IL: Richard Owen Roberts, 1980), 162.

<sup>111</sup> Thomas Boston, *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, vol. 4 (1849; reprint, Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 77.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

extremity of a battle. We must watch when others sleep.”<sup>113</sup> A minister, in other words, cannot be both slothful and faithful; the two are incompatible.

### **The Pastor’s Work**

It was said that Samuel Rutherford’s “people boasted that their minister was always at his books, always among his parishioners, always at their sickbeds and their death-beds, always catechising their children and always alone with his God.”<sup>114</sup> Whether or not this was true, it was the impression his congregation had, and not without good reason. Like most Puritan pastors, Rutherford was tireless in his efforts to do the work to which he had been called. That work, according to Puritan pastors, included at least seven areas of pastoral responsibility: study, prayer, preaching, administering the sacraments, catechizing, evangelizing, and counseling and ministering to the sick and dying.

#### *Study*

Puritan pastors and their spiritual descendants were students of scripture, concerned with understanding God’s thoughts before they spoke on his behalf. Spiritual descendant Charles Simeon (1759-1836) is a case in point. “I never preach,” he said, “unless I feel satisfied that I have the mind of God as regards the sense of the passage... My endeavour is to bring out of Scripture *what is there*... I have a great jealousy on this head, never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding.”<sup>115</sup> With some texts, this is no easy task, which is why Simeon advised,

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<sup>113</sup> John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, vol. 6 (1820; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 568.

<sup>114</sup> Whyte, 4.

<sup>115</sup> Packer, 284.

“when you cannot get at the full and real meaning of a passage, leave it alone.”<sup>116</sup> Such study, then, requires determination and diligence. The Reverend Isaac Watts, in his *Rules for the Preacher’s Conduct*, lists diligence in study as imperative:

RULE 10. Be not slothful or negligent in your weekly preparation for the pulpit. Take due time for it; begin so early in the week that you may have time enough before to furnish your preparation well; and always allow for accidental occurrences, either from indisposition of the body, from interruptions by company, or from unforeseen business or trouble, so that you may not be reduced to the necessity of hurrying over your work in haste at the end of the week, and serving God and the souls of men with poor, cold, and careless performances.<sup>117</sup>

Difficult or not, Puritan ministers took great care to understand the scriptures. They expected no less of themselves and no less of one another.

Being a student of scripture, however, was only the beginning. Puritan pastors were also students of the human heart—both their own and the hearts of others. This was Pastor David Dickson’s point, when he charged a young minister at his ordination “to study two books together: the Bible, and his own heart,”<sup>118</sup> for one reveals the grace of God, the other man’s need of it. The goal, they said, was not merely Bible knowledge or self-understanding. As John Flavel put it, “all our reading, studying, and preaching, is but trifling hypocrisy, till the things read, studied, and preached, be felt in some degree upon our own hearts.”<sup>119</sup> Knowledge for knowledge’s sake, whether of the Bible or of oneself, is never enough. Puritan pastors believed that study should lead to holiness and improved character. If it did not, it was nothing more than an exercise in intellectual vanity.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> *The Christian Pastor's Manual: A Selection of Tracts on the Duties, Difficulties, and Encouragements of the Christian Ministry*, (1826; reprint, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Publications, 1991), 237.

<sup>118</sup> Packer, 286.

<sup>119</sup> Flavel, 568.

## Prayer

Of course, holiness and improved character, whether in minister or congregation, is the work of God, which is why Puritan pastors also spoke much about the need for prayer. Isaac Watts, for example, urged,

Be very solicitous about the success of your labors in the pulpit. Water the seed sown, not only with public but with secret prayer. Plead with God importunately, that He would not suffer you to labor in vain. Do not be like that foolish bird, the ostrich, which lays her eggs in the dust and leaves them there, regardless of whether they come to life or not. God has not given her understanding. But let not this folly be your character or practice. Labor, watch, and pray that your sermons and the fruit of your studies may become words of divine life to souls.<sup>120</sup>

Richard Baxter agreed: “Prayer must carry on our work as well as preaching; he preacheth not heartily to his people, that prayeth not earnestly for them.”<sup>121</sup>

What should ministers pray for their congregations? The Puritan John Owen, in an ordination sermon he preached, suggested three things:

1. For *the success of the word* that we preach unto them...that is, for all the ends of living unto God,—for direction in duty, for instruction in the truth, for growth in grace, for all things whereby we may come to the enjoyment of God. We should pray that all these ends may be accomplished in our congregations, in the dispensation of the word, or else we sow seed at random, which will not succeed merely by our sowing; for let the husbandman break up the fallow ground, and harrow it, and cast in the seed,—unless showers come, he will have no crop; in like manner, after we have cast the seed of the gospel, though the hearts of men are prepared in some measure, unless there come the showers of the Spirit upon them, there will be no profiting...

2. We are to pray *for the presence of Christ* in all our assemblies; for this is that whereon depends all the efficacy of the ordinances of the gospel. Christ hath given us many promises of it, and we are to act in faith concerning it, and to pray in faith for it in our assemblies; which is a great ministerial duty: and if we do it

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<sup>120</sup> *The Christian Pastor's Manual: A Selection of Tracts on the Duties, Difficulties, and Encouragements of the Christian Ministry*, 243.

<sup>121</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 122.

not, we are ignorant of our duty, and are willing to labour in the fire, where all must perish; we fight at hazard, for all the efficacy of the ordinances of preaching and praying doth not depend upon any thing in ourselves—on our gift, notions, parts, fervency,—but it depends only upon the presence of Christ...

3. Our prayers should be with respect unto *the state and condition* of the church... We ought to suit our prayers according to all we know concerning [its members], and be satisfied in it that Christ himself will come in to recover them who are fallen, to establish them who stand, to heal them who do backslide, to strengthen them who are tempted, to encourage them who are running and pressing forward to perfection, to relieve them who are disconsolate and in the dark...our prayers should be for a communication of supplies unto them continually, in all these cases.<sup>122</sup>

Puritan pastors prayed, for they understood that unless God's blessing attended their ministries, their labors would come to naught.

### *Preaching*

Puritan pastors believed that a minister's chief duty is to feed the flock through the diligent preaching of the word. "This feeding," John Owen wrote, "is of the essence of the office of a pastor."<sup>123</sup> "Our great business," Thomas Boston said, "is to bring souls to Christ, and to preach his unsearchable riches."<sup>124</sup> The centrality of such preaching was attested to by Pastor William Bradshaw who, in 1605, claimed to speak for all Puritan ministers in his treatise, *Englishe Puritanisme, containing the maine opinions of the rigidest sort of those that are called Puritanes in the realm of England*. In it he wrote, "They hould that the highest and supreame office and authoritie of the Pastor, is to preach the gospell solemnly and publickly to the Congregation, by interpreting the written word

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<sup>122</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 23 vols. (1850-55; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965-1991), 9:457-58.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:75.

<sup>124</sup> Boston, *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, 79.



of God, and applying the same by exhortation and reproof unto them. They hould that this was the greatest worke that Christ & his Apostles did.”<sup>125</sup> Interpretation and application: these were the hallmarks of Puritan preaching; the latter being just as important as the former.

On the matter of application, the Reverend Richard Mather said that he aimed “to shoot his arrows not over people’s heads but into their hearts and consciences.”<sup>126</sup> Baxter agreed: “If our words be not sharpened, and pierce not as nails, they will hardly be felt by stony hearts.”<sup>127</sup> Such application, however, must begin with the minister. As Owen said,

*...no man preaches that sermon well to others that doth not first preach it to his own heart.* He who doth not feed on, digest, and thrive by, what he prepares for his people, he may give them poison, as far as he knows; for, unless he finds the power of it in his own heart, he cannot have any grounds of confidence that it will have power in the hearts of others. It is an easier thing to bring our heads to preach than our hearts to preach. To bring our heads to preach, is but to fill our minds and memories with some notions of truth, of our own or other men, and speak them out to give satisfaction to ourselves and others: this is very easy. But to bring our hearts to preach, is to be transformed into the power of these truths; or to find the power of them, both before, in fashioning our minds and hearts, and in delivering of them, that we may have benefit; and to be acted with zeal for God and compassion to the souls of men.<sup>128</sup>

Preaching that affected the heart was what Puritan pastors were after, both their own and the hearts of their people.

Having preached with right hearts, Puritan ministers rested in God’s approval, no matter how others responded. For, as Matthew Henry said,

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<sup>125</sup> Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948), 183.

<sup>126</sup> Ryken, 103.

<sup>127</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 117.

<sup>128</sup> Owen, 9:455.

If they be faithful in the trust reposed in them, and their hearts upright with God in the discharge of it, whatever acceptance they and their message meet with among men, they are sure to be accepted of the Lord... Though we should not gain our point, yet we shall in no wise lose our reward: though it be not well succeeded, if it be said, “Well done thou good and faithful servant,” we shall “enter into into the joy of our Lord.”<sup>129</sup>

Happy, then, were those who faithfully served; and blessed were the communities that received their service. Indeed, as Puritan Richard Heyricke said, “Heaven itself cannot show forth a more excellent creature than a faithful preacher... Yea, heaven itself is not more glorious than a small village having a Peter, a Paul, to preach in it.”<sup>130</sup>

### *Administering the Sacraments*

In November 1647, the Westminster Assembly, composed of pastors and theologians who were all Calvinists in theology and Puritans in the broad sense, completed *The Shorter Catechism*, which asks in question eighty-eight, “What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?” The answer given is, “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer: all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”<sup>131</sup> This answer reflects the Puritan belief that the sacraments were just as necessary for Christian growth as are the word and prayer. In *A Brief and Plain Declaration Concerning the Desires of All Those Faithful Ministers that Have and Do Seek for the Discipline and Reformation of*

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<sup>129</sup> Matthew Henry, *The Complete Works of the Rev. Matthew Henry (His Unfinished Commentary Excepted). Being a Collection of All His Treatises, Sermons, and Tracts as Published by Himself and a Memoir of His Life*, vol. 1 (1855; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 478.

<sup>130</sup> R. C. Richardson, *Puritanism in North-West England: A Regional Study of the Diocese of Chester to 1642* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), 71.

<sup>131</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 311.

*the Church in England*, the Puritans said that the “three parts of a pastor’s duty” were “to preach, to minister the sacraments, and to pray.”<sup>132</sup> Indeed, they “are so necessarily required of him in the word of God [that] no man may rightly execute the office of a pastor but he that performeth all these, each one in their due time.”<sup>133</sup>

The necessity of the sacraments for Christian growth may be questioned by some today, but it was not in the Puritan era. The word, the sacraments, and prayer were each understood to be means God used to strengthen his people in grace, each with its own purpose. The Reverend Thomas Watson beautifully differentiated between two of the three. “In the Word preached,” he said, “the saints hear Christ’s voice; in the sacrament (by which he meant communion) they have his kiss.”<sup>134</sup> There is mystery here, to be sure, though Watson’s comment is representative of the Puritans. They understood that God’s love and grace are communicated to his people through the sacraments even more intimately than they are through the word and prayer. All are needed, and it falls to pastors to see that the sheep receive what they need.

### *Catechizing*

The most effective Puritan pastors also devoted themselves to catechizing those under their care, that is, instructing them in the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Some did this exclusively with children; others with entire households. Pastor and poet George Herbert explained the rationale behind this work:

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<sup>132</sup> *Elizabethan Puritanism*, ed. Leonard J. Trinterud (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 270.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1-12* (1660; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 251.

The Country Parson values Catechizing highly: for there being three points to his duty, the one, to infuse a competent knowledge of salvation in every one of his Flock; the other, to multiply, and build up this knowledge, to a spiritual Temple, the third, to inflame this knowledge, to press, and drive it to practice, turning it to reformation of life, by pithy and lively exhortations; Catechizing is the first point, and but by Catechizing, the other cannot be attained.<sup>135</sup>

Catechesis was the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century equivalent to what is sometimes called “discipleship” today; though clearly, it was more structured and theologically driven than much of the discipleship that occurs today. Puritan pastors wanted to ensure that the faith of their people was rooted in the truth of scripture.

The most well-known proponent of catechesis was Richard Baxter, whom the Reverend Charles Spurgeon, speaking at a nineteenth-century assembly of city missionaries in London, commended as an exemplar for their ongoing labors: “There was not a child in his parish whom he had not catechized; there was not a backslider whom he had not warned; there was not a reprobate whom he had not addressed with solemn awe.”<sup>136</sup> And, as Puritan John Wilkinson said, “As a result of Baxter’s labours at Kidderminster, through almost twenty years, a spiritual desert was transformed into a garden of God.”<sup>137</sup> Baxter’s labors bore much fruit.

Interestingly, in the beginning, catechesis was not Baxter’s primary concern. As he himself admitted,

I must confess that I find by some experience, that this is the work that must reform indeed...and must make true godliness a commoner thing...I wonder at myself, how I was kept off from so dear and excellent a duty so long...I was convinced of it, but my apprehensions of the difficulties were too great, and my

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<sup>135</sup> George Herbert, *The Country Parson, the Temple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 82-83.

<sup>136</sup> Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus: The Reformed Pastor*, 45.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

apprehensions of the duties too small: and so I was hindered long from the performance. I thought the people would but have scorned it, and none but a few that had least need would have submitted to it. And the thing seemed strange, and I [waited] till the people were better prepared; and I thought my strength would never go through it, having so great burdens on me before...I was long detained in delays, which I beseech the Lord of mercy to forgive. Whereas upon trial, I find the difficulties almost nothing, save only through my extraordinary bodily weakness, to that which I imagined; and I find the benefits and comforts of the work to be such, as that I profess, I would not wish that I had forborne it for all the riches in the world...<sup>138</sup>

Once begun, Baxter and his assistant spent two days a week, from morning till evening, visiting families in the congregation, examining their understanding of the catechism, and instructing them in the same. His habit was to examine and instruct parents and children together, thereby providing an example to parents of how to instruct their youngsters in the faith. His goal was to visit each of the families under his charge once a year. It was relentless work but contributed greatly to the spiritual health of the congregation as well as the community. As Baxter acknowledged: “When I came thither first there was about one family in a street that worshipped God and called on His name, and when I came away there were some streets where there was not past one family in the side of a street that did not so, and that did not, by professing serious godliness, give us hopes of their sincerity.”<sup>139</sup> Baxter’s labors made a significant difference.

### *Evangelism*

Puritan pastors were also convinced of the need for evangelism; but since the state largely mandated church membership, their evangelism was aimed at its members. As Richard Baxter put it,

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 16.

The first part of our ministerial work lieth in bringing unsound professors of the faith to sincerity, that they who before were Christians in name and show, may be so indeed... The misery of the unconverted is so great, that it calleth loudest to us for our compassion. We have a work to do for them, even “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light”: to soften and open their hearts to the entertainment of “the truth, if God, peradventure, will give them repentance to the acknowledging of it, that they may escape out of the snare.”<sup>140</sup>

To engage in such ministry was both necessary and of utmost importance. As Baxter went on to say, “He that will let a sinner go to hell for want of speaking to him doth set less by souls that the Redeemer of souls did, and less by his neighbour than rational charity will allow him to do by his greatest enemy.”<sup>141</sup> To ignore the lost, in other words, was both unthinkable and unconscionable.

The manner in which evangelism was done was through the preached word; though such preaching consisted of more than mere salvation messages and calls to faith. They were sermons fitted for entire congregations, which included both the regenerate and the unregenerate. “The Puritans,” theologian J. I. Packer said, “would have criticised the modern evangelistic appeal, with its wheedling for ‘decisions’, as an unfortunate attempt by man to intrude into the Holy Spirit’s province.”<sup>142</sup> They understood that God, not man, is the author of salvation and the operative agent in all conversions. Hence the Reverend William Gurnall’s reminder to ministers: “God never laid it upon thee to convert those he sent thee to. No; to publish the gospel is thy duty, to receive it is theirs... God judgeth not of his servants’ work by the success of their labour, but by their

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>142</sup> Packer, 283.

faithfulness to deliver his message.”<sup>143</sup> Put another way, effectiveness in evangelism is determined by God.

### *Counseling and Ministry to the Sick and Dying*

Finally, in addition to their public roles, Puritan pastors took seriously the need to minister to individuals. “A minister is not only for public preaching,” Baxter said, “but to be a known counsellor for [Christians’] souls...so that each man that is in doubts and straits, should bring his case to him and desire resolution...To this end it is very necessary that we be acquainted with the nature of true grace.”<sup>144</sup> This was particularly needful during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, when physical suffering and premature death were commonplace. “Another part of our oversight,” Baxter continued, “lieth in visiting the sick and helping them to prepare for fruitful life or happy death.”<sup>145</sup> The Puritan era was a difficult time; life was hard and death far more prevalent than it is today. Providing counsel and comfort were a significant part of a Puritan pastor’s work.

### **The Evaluation of Pastoral Effectiveness**

Godly character and faithfulness to the work notwithstanding, Puritan pastors and their spiritual descendants were not without their share of ministerial disappointments. “A faithful minister preaches good tidings to all distressed consciences,”<sup>146</sup> spiritual descendant Robert Murray M’Cheyne (1813-1843) said to his congregation on the sixth anniversary of his installation as pastor of St. Peter’s, Dundee. But then he added,

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<sup>143</sup> William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour* (1864; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), second pagination, 574.

<sup>144</sup> Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus: The Reformed Pastor*, 83-84.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>146</sup> Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (1892; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 579.

What has been our success? I fear there are not many of you as happy as you might be. Are not most, like Peter, sinking; or sad, like the two going to Emmaus? Are not most in all our parishes rather seeking than finding rest? How little is there among you of the “beauty—the oil of joy, and the garment of praise!” How few can truly sing the 103rd Psalm; how few feel their sins removed as far as east is from west; how few keep themselves in the love of God; how few have Christ dwelling in their hearts by faith; how few are filled with all the fulness of God, and rejoice with joy unspeakable, and full of glory!<sup>147</sup>

Then, with the sort of honesty seldom expressed from most pulpits, M’Cheyne added,

A faithful watchman preaches a free Savior to all the world... This has been the great object of our ministry. In all our parishes, at the present day, the great mass of the people are living without Christ, and without God, and without hope in the world. The most, even of church-going people, it is to be feared, are “dead in trespasses and sins.” Ever since coming among you, our great object has been to awaken such. We have proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God... What has been our success? Blessed be God, there are some of you who have fled for refuge to the hope set before you; but most sleep on.<sup>148</sup>

M’Cheyne died four months after he gave this sermon, with most of his congregation still asleep. Was his ministry a success or a failure?

### **Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Authors on the Work of the Pastor in General and Small Church Ministry in Particular**

The third area of literature explored was twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers who address the character and work of the pastor in general and the challenges of small church ministry in particular. Interestingly, unlike the Puritan notables and their spiritual descendants, these authors had much to say about the issues and questions that guided this research. This no doubt is owed to the fact that today’s church is more mindful of success than was the church of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 582.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 583-84.



Given the suffering that befell many Puritan congregations, it is not surprising that pastors of that era had more to say about faithfulness, both their own and that of their congregations, than they did about success. We begin with their thoughts on ministerial character and work, and then take up the issue of effectiveness or success.

### **The Character of the Pastor**

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers mention several character qualities that are incumbent upon those who shepherd God's flock. These qualities are presented under six general headings: holiness and a life of devotion, love for God and his people, humility and gentleness, genuine faith and contentment with one's call, faithfulness to the work God gives, and love for the lost and for the renewal work of the Lord.

#### *Holiness and a Life of Devotion*

As Pastors Derek Prime and Alistair Begg write, "The New Testament places as great a stress upon character as a qualification for spiritual leadership as upon gifting."<sup>149</sup> They drive the point home by quoting Robert Murray M'Cheyne, who stressed one character quality above all others when he said, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness," and "How awful a weapon in the hand of God is a holy minister."<sup>150</sup> Holiness, then, is central to all that a minister is and does. In fact, if, as Eugene Peterson put it, "the role of the pastor is to embody the gospel,"<sup>151</sup> that is, to live it out among those to and with whom one preaches, teaches, and prays, then theologian Christopher

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<sup>149</sup> Derek Prime and Alistair Begg, *On Being a Pastor: Understanding Our Calling and Work* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 36.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>151</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, "Pastor in the Present Tense," *Leadership Journal* 32, no. 3 (2011): 51.

Wright is correct: “There is no biblical mission without biblical holiness.”<sup>152</sup> Holiness, in other words, is imperative for all who are called to pastoral ministry. Behind one’s public life there must be a hidden life where one’s roots are firmly fixed in God.

In Peterson’s view, however, the congregation is more than simply the context in which holiness is seen; it is also the place where it is developed: “It goes without saying that it is the place of ministry: we preach the word and administer the sacraments, we give pastoral care and administer the community life, we teach and we give spiritual direction. But it is also the place in which we develop virtue, learn to love, advance in hope—*become* what we preach.”<sup>153</sup> Put another way, the congregation is the place where God does his sanctifying work in the lives of his ministers.

### *Love for God and His People*

The lesson from Peter’s recommissioning, in John 21, is that the command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”<sup>154</sup> is also the abiding principle of pastoral ministry. As Kent and Barbara Hughes have said, “Before all things, even service to God, we must love God with all our hearts. It is the first question of every theologian, every pastor, every missionary. It is the quintessential question for everyone who wants to please God.”<sup>155</sup> Henri Nouwen acknowledged the same principle when, referring to Jesus’ thrice-asked question of Peter on that same occasion, he said, “The question is not: How many people take you

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<sup>152</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2010), 126.

<sup>153</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 21.

<sup>154</sup> Matthew 22:37.

<sup>155</sup> Hughes and Hughes, 58.

seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus?”<sup>156</sup> Love for God and his Son is what ultimately matters.

Such love does not end with God, however. It issues in love for his people. James Stalker, the nineteenth-century Scottish minister, bore testimony to this when he wrote:

When I first was settled in a church, I discovered a thing of which nobody had told me, and which I had not anticipated, but which proved a tremendous aid in doing the work of the ministry. I fell in love with my congregation. I do not know how otherwise to express it. It was as genuine a blossom of the heart as any which I have ever experienced. It made it easy to do anything for my people.<sup>157</sup>

Such love also makes it easier for one’s flock to respond appropriately to the difficult things a pastor must sometimes tell them. “Love me,” said Saint Augustine, “and then say anything to me and about me you like.”<sup>158</sup> Or, as Richard Baxter’s flock used to say, “We take all things well from one who always and wholly loves us.”<sup>159</sup> The love of God is a benefit to both the shepherd and the sheep.

### *Humility and Gentleness*

Humility, so said John Stott, is the essential quality that a pastor must have: “humility before Christ, whose subordinates we are; humility before Scripture, of which we are stewards; humility before the world, whose opposition we are bound to encounter; and humility before the congregation, whose members we are to love and serve.”<sup>160</sup> The

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<sup>156</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 24.

<sup>157</sup> John Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 114.

<sup>158</sup> Prime and Begg, 159.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry*, 114.

reason humility is so essential is because the temptation to pride is so insidious and such an ever-present danger. As Stott went on to say,

Pastors and other church leaders are especially vulnerable, for we are always in the limelight. Our elevated pulpit is a dangerous place for any child of Adam to occupy. Our leadership easily degenerates into either autocracy or person pleasing. We need constantly to remember that Jesus introduced into the world a new style of servant leadership.<sup>161</sup>

Urging this style of leadership on those about to enter the ministry, Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, gave the following advice to a group of people on the eve of their ordination:

1. Thank God, often and always...Thank God, carefully and wonderingly, for your continuing privileges...Thankfulness is a soil in which pride does not easily grow.
2. Take care about confession of your sins...Be sure to criticize yourself in God's presence: that is your self-examination. And put yourself under the divine criticism: that is your confession.
3. Be ready to accept humiliations. They can hurt terribly, but they help you to be humble. There can be the trivial humiliations. Accept them. There can be the bigger humiliations...All of these can be so many chances to be a little nearer to our humble and crucified Lord.
4. Do not worry about status...There is only one status that our Lord bids us be concerned with, and that is the status of proximity to himself...
5. Use your sense of humor. Laugh about things, laugh at the absurdities of life, laugh about yourself, and about your own absurdity. We are all of us infinitesimally small and ludicrous creatures within God's universe. You have to be serious, but never solemn, because if you are solemn about anything there is the risk of becoming solemn about yourself.<sup>162</sup>

Humility is the indispensable quality of pastoral leadership.

Gentleness is also required of those who serve God's flock. "We are to be," said Stott, "loving fathers and mothers of the church family rather than strict disciplinarians.

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<sup>161</sup> John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 173.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 173-74.

Paul could decide to visit Corinth with an apostle's authority and challenge the arrogant.

But he chooses not to—or rather, he leaves the choice to them... *What do you prefer?*

*Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?* (v. 21)."<sup>163</sup> It is

gentleness, not severity, that is characteristic of genuine Christian leaders.

### *Genuine Faith and Contentment with One's Call*

What is meant by genuine faith is, in fact, believing to be true what one professes.

Strange as it may seem, this is not always the case with pastors. As Kent and Barbara

Hughes put it, a pastor must believe that the God of scripture exists, that Christ is the

creator, sustainer, goal, and lover of one's soul.<sup>164</sup> Alas! pastors sometimes fall short of

such confidence, especially when difficulties and disappointments arise. The questions

that are put to the test at such times are, Is God still at work? and Can he be trusted to do

what is right? Marshall Shelley, editor of *Leadership Journal*, asked such questions of a

dozen pastors in New York and Vermont whose churches had an average attendance of

less than one hundred and were not growing:

What keeps a pastor motivated in a church that hasn't reached critical mass, that's hanging on for survival? What keeps him going when for twelve years there's been no numerical growth? "I'm a Calvinist," says [George] Vanderpoel. "I believe in God's sovereignty and that I must wait on the Lord. I must faithfully teach the Word until he brings the increase."<sup>165</sup>

Notwithstanding the need to intentionally seek to reach the community God has placed

the church in, this is what is meant by genuine faith: believing in God's sovereignty and

waiting on the Lord, even as one faithfully labors.

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<sup>163</sup> Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry*, 111-112 (the biblical citation is from 1 Corinthians 4, New International Version).

<sup>164</sup> Hughes and Hughes, 65-68.

<sup>165</sup> Shelley: 39.

Faith alone, however, is not enough. Pastors must also be content to serve the churches God has assigned them, which requires that they see their congregations as God sees them and give thanks. For, as Peterson said, “Every church community, no matter how small, how deficient in piety, how lacking in works—think of those seven congregations of the Apocalypse!—is a miraculous and precious gift, an instance, no matter how obscure or flawed, of the kingdom of God, and must, for that reason, be lifted up in thanks.”<sup>166</sup> This does not mean that critiquing or even criticizing one’s congregation is never warranted,<sup>167</sup> but the practice of giving thanks goes a long way to preventing what pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer sternly warned against: “A pastor should not complain about his congregation, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men.”<sup>168</sup> Instead, pastors are to dedicate themselves to God and to those they have been called to serve. For, as theologian Francis Schaeffer said, “Only one thing is important: to be consecrated persons in God’s place for us, at each moment.”<sup>169</sup>

### *Faithfulness to the Work God Gives*

Faithfulness or perseverance is rarely enjoined on those basking in the glow of success; one hardly needs to be urged to carry on when things are going well. But, as many pastors have learned, ministry is hard and filled with feelings of failure. “I need

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<sup>166</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 214.

<sup>167</sup> The Apostle Paul, in his letters, gave thanks for all the churches he wrote to, except for the church in Galatia. In that case, he criticized the church for its embracing of the Judaizers’ teaching. (I am indebted to Dr. Michael Honeycutt for pointing this out to me.)

<sup>168</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans., John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 29.

<sup>169</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 14.

regular reminders of my call to faithfulness, not to success,”<sup>170</sup> one pastor said. Indeed, the temptation to grow discouraged or to give up altogether is much too common. In a 1963 commencement address to the graduates of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Dr. James Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary, surprised the graduates by telling them the truth about pastoral ministry in the mid-twentieth-century:

The Churches are going to fail... We belong to a generation that is all but betrothed to a scientific view of things, [while] the Church seems preoccupied with an irrelevant and irrational mysticism of thought and message. We belong to an age which makes every man a metropolitan, and the Church's view of social complexities seems geared to the village. Our society is so mobile that rolling along we do not put down roots... but the Church talks of ministries to families as if they were going to be born, educated, at work, sick, and dead within the confines of the town square. Whether the people of God are captives of suburbia may be a matter of proper debate; but that the Churches—in variety or in unity—do not notoriously affect the course of common life in general seems, by the evidence, to be beyond dispute.<sup>171</sup>

Indeed, even in Bible-believing churches, the response of many will be less than enthusiastic. As theologian John Murray counseled a young ordinand, “It will be hard for the people to receive the unadulterated Word.”<sup>172</sup> A minister's words often fall on deaf ears, for the love of sin is great. Even so, a minister's charge does not change, and thankfully there is one who takes notice of such faithfulness and one day will reward it.

As Bishop Lesslie Newbigin said,

Every faithful act of service, every honest labor to make the world a better place, which seemed to have been forever lost and forgotten in the rubble of history, will be seen on that day to have contributed to the perfect fellowship of God's

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<sup>170</sup> Briggs: 87.

<sup>171</sup> James A. Jones, "Reflections on Failure: 1963 Commencement Address, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary," *Pittsburgh Perspective* 4, no. 3 (1963): 7-8.

<sup>172</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 176.

kingdom...All who have committed their work in faithfulness to God will be by Him raised up to share in the new age, and will find that their labor was not lost, but that it has found its place in the completed kingdom.<sup>173</sup>

Faithfulness to the work God gives is the calling of every minister.

*Love for the Lost and for the Renewal Work of the Lord*

The final character quality discussed by twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers is love for the lost and for the renewal work of the Lord. For, as Dr. Reggie McNeal said, “People matter to God by virtue of their being created in his image. They are intentional acts of creation by a loving God. They therefore matter to the people of God.”<sup>174</sup> Hence McNeal’s conclusion: “The role of the church is simply this: to bless the world. In doing this, the people of God reveal God’s heart for the world.”<sup>175</sup> God’s heart for the world, however, is not only expressed through the preaching of the gospel; it is also expressed in acts of service and mercy. Christopher Wright observed, “The Bible does not begin at Genesis 3 (or end at Revelation 20). You might think so when you listen to some presentations of the Bible’s message and mission. That is to say, the Bible is not just about the solution to our sin problem and how to survive the day of judgment. It begins with creation and ends with new creation.”<sup>176</sup> In other words, “There is also an unavoidable ethical dimension to the mission of God’s people.”<sup>177</sup> They care about the redemption and the renewal of God’s whole creation. “Our problem,” Wright goes on to

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<sup>173</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Signs Amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 47.

<sup>174</sup> Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2009), 34-35.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>176</sup> Wright, 40.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.



say, “is that so often the church is no *different* from the world, and in some respects even worse.”<sup>178</sup> For example,

A divided, split and fighting church has nothing to say or to give to a divided, broken and violent world. An immoral church has nothing to say to an immoral world. A church riddled with corruption, caste discrimination and other forms of social, ethnic, or gender oppression has nothing to say to the world where such things are rampant. A church with leaders seemingly obsessed with wealth and power has nothing to say to a world of greedy tyrants. A church that is bad news in such ways has no good news to share. Or at least, it has, but its words are drowned out by its life.<sup>179</sup>

The people of God, therefore, must first act like God. They must possess a love for one another that extends to all who are made in God’s image, a love that manifests itself in practical service as well as in the proclamation of truth. And it begins with pastors who have such a heart.

### **The Work of the Pastor**

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors also list several responsibilities that fall to those who serve as Christ’s ministers. Seven will be discussed: prayer, preaching and teaching, pastoral care, building community, suffering with the sheep, walking with them in the way, and leading the congregation into the community for the sake of the community.

#### *Prayer*

“Prayer is our principal and main work,” Derek Prime and Alistair Begg contend. “It has priority over the ministry of the Word in that it must come first. It is by prayer that

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is effectively unsheathed.”<sup>180</sup> The Reverend William Still concurred: “...let the people know that your ministry of the Word is going to be soaked in prayer; your own and those who will join you.”<sup>181</sup> It is not just for the ministry of the word that a pastor should pray, however. According to Eugene Peterson, the greatest help a minister can offer someone who is struggling with interpersonal issues is prayer with and for them:

...prayer is the chief pastoral work in relationship to a person’s desires for and difficulties with intimacy. Anything less or other than prayer fails to deal with either the ultimacy of the desires or the complexity of the difficulties. Prayer with and for persons centers the desire in God and puts the difficulties in perspective under God...In prayer the desires are not talked about, they are expressed to God. In prayer the difficulties are not analyzed and studied, they are worked through with God.<sup>182</sup>

Prayer, then, is the first and most important work that a minister can do. Everything else follows prayer and is dependent on it.

### *Preaching and Teaching*

Following closely on the heels of prayer is the ministry of the word; for, as John Stott said, “churches live, grow and flourish by God’s word, but they languish and perish without it.”<sup>183</sup> William Still, who for fifty-three years was the pastor of Gilcomston South Church in Aberdeen, Scotland, a church that, for its size, sent a disproportionately high number of missionaries and pastors to the world, said that the primary work of the minister is to feed the flock:

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<sup>180</sup> Prime and Begg, 68.

<sup>181</sup> William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House and Christian Focus Publications, 1984), 24.

<sup>182</sup> Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 55.

<sup>183</sup> Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor*, 97.

It is not syntheses of the Word of God, not doctrinal presentations of the Word, but the very Word of God itself, read, commented upon, expounded, and its parts vitally and intelligently related that does the work in men's hearts. For example, for fifty years, in one place, I have preached through the Bible, book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, New Testament and Old Testament several times... Now, the principal product of this is not a mass of sermon notes... The product is the lives that are loving and serving Christ in various parts of the world, not least in the ministry in its various denominations.<sup>184</sup>

It is the ministry of the word that enlarges the flock's understanding of the faith and that the Holy Spirit uses to enable the sheep to live in obedience to Christ. Indeed, the goal in feeding the flock, William Still went on to say, "is to fatten the sheep for the kill," by which he meant to prepare them to offer their lives in consecration to God.<sup>185</sup> The Bible, in other words, is meant to help believers submit their lives to Christ. To accomplish this, however, it must be used as God intended. As Donald Coggan, former Archbishop of Canterbury, said,

The Christian preacher has a boundary set for him. When he enters the pulpit he is not an entirely free man. There is a very real sense in which it may be said of him that the Almighty has set him his bounds that he shall not pass. He is not at liberty to invent or choose his message; it has been committed to him, and it is for him to declare, expound and commend it to his hearers.<sup>186</sup>

All the more reason for a minister to diligently study. As Bishop Phillips Brooks said, "The preacher's life must be a life of large accumulation... Learn to study for the sake of truth, learn to think for the profit and the joy of thinking. Then your sermons shall be like the leaping of a fountain, and not like the pumping of a pump."<sup>187</sup> Indeed, if waters are to

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<sup>184</sup> Still, 19-20.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>186</sup> Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry*, 105.

<sup>187</sup> Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor*, 107.

quench the souls of men, they must be living waters from deep wells, not mere words upon words that dull the ears.

### *Pastoral Care*

Care of the flock is done in a variety of ways. Prayer for and with the sheep in the context of counseling has already been mentioned. To that, hospital visitations might also be added, for they too are a context in which pastoral care is provided. Indeed, as Prime and Begg point out, “Seldom will we get closer to our flock, or will they look for our spiritual encouragement more, than when they are unwell, and when perhaps the future is uncertain so far as their health is concerned.”<sup>188</sup> But whether in hospital or counseling room, it is of utmost importance that pastors be skilled listeners. William Still well understood the need for such attentiveness:

When real people come seeking real help, receive them with all grace, patience and forbearance. Let them talk: don’t jump to conclusions and turn the interview into another sermon on the lines they may have heard many times before. If they are real, they know all that. But there may be something that has not been made plain so far, at least to them. Let them talk, and you listen.

The hardest thing ministers, who are great talkers, find to do is to listen. Don’t be making up your next speech while the other is talking. Listen! You may hear something you have never heard before. Don’t assume that this problem is like many others you have dealt with. It may seem to be, but as no two people are exactly alike, so no two persons’ problems are alike. You will find that many of your fixed ideas, which you may think are thoroughly Christian and apply to all cases, will be upset if you listen carefully enough to begin to see what the solution to a particular problem may be.<sup>189</sup>

Caring for the sheep is most effectively done through relationships, which take time to build. Shepherds make a point of doing so.

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<sup>188</sup> Prime and Begg, 178.

<sup>189</sup> Still, 43-44.

### *Building Community*

William Still also mentions the importance of pastors cultivating a sense of community within the church: “A true Christian fellowship is a place where stray cats and dogs can find a home. It is a hospital, where the only sin is to hide your wounds from the doctor and nurse.”<sup>190</sup> The minister’s job, therefore, “is to strip all the fearful ones, however gently, patiently, faithfully, and all the hypocritical ones of their camouflage and cloaks.”<sup>191</sup> The true pastor strives to create an atmosphere of acceptance, a place where all who truly belong to Christ can also belong to his people.

### *Suffering with the Sheep*

To this Eugene Peterson adds yet another responsibility: the call of the minister to feel the suffering of others, to enter into the sheep’s pain. “Pastoral work,” he says, “is a conscious, deliberate plunge into the experience of suffering.”<sup>192</sup> “The task of pastoral work is to comfort without in any way avoiding the human realities of guilt or denying the divine realities of judgment.”<sup>193</sup> The natural response is to avoid suffering at all costs. Yet, the Bible’s call for all Christians, and particularly for pastors, is to share in the suffering of others.

Pastoral work joins the sufferer, shares the experience of God’s anger, enters into the pain, the hurt, the sense of absurdity, the descent into the depths. It is not the task of the pastor to alleviate suffering, to minimize it, or to mitigate it, but to

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 114.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 117.

share it after the example of our Lord Messiah: “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:4, KJV).<sup>194</sup>

Indeed, as Peterson goes on to say, “Pastoral work among the suffering wears a path between home and sanctuary—listens to the poured out, individualized grief and brings it into the sanctuary where it becomes part of the common grief, is placed at the foot of the cross and subjected to the powers of salvation.”<sup>195</sup> Pastors, in other words, lead their flocks through the valleys of deep shadows to the place where light is found and God’s redemptive purposes are made known.

### *Walking with the Sheep*

As the biblical imagery suggests, shepherds accompany their sheep, they go where they go. This, too, is part of the pastoral call. As Eugene Peterson writes,

Each Lord’s Day the pastor speaks the invitational command, “Let us worship God.” But the work does not terminate an hour later with the pronouncing of the benediction, for pastoral work also accompanies the people where they live out what they have heard and sung and said and believed in worship... Weekday pastoral work unfolds the implications in the ordinary lives of people as they work, love, suffer, grieve, play, learn, and grow in times of crisis and times of routine. Worship calls a congregation to attention before God’s words, coordinates responses of praise and obedience, and then sends the people out into the community to live out the meaning of that praise and obedience. But they are not only sent, they are accompanied... The pastor who leads people in worship is companion to those same people between acts of worship.<sup>196</sup>

In terms of intellectual stimulation and personal satisfaction, many ministers find that the work of pastor-as-companion pales in comparison to pastor-in-the-pulpit or pastor-at-the-lectern. It is not for that fact, however, any less important.

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 19.

*Leading the Congregation into the Community for the Sake of the Community*

Finally, as Christopher Wright said, “The mission of God’s people is to bring *good* news to a world where *bad* news is depressingly endemic.”<sup>197</sup> And the good news, as Wright went on to say, “needs to be heard *and* to be seen. It needs words and deeds. Message and proof.”<sup>198</sup> Put another way, Christ’s followers are to be missionally minded, which means that Christ’s ministers must make it their aim to help them become so. For, as Amy Sherman, who directs the Center on Faith in Communities at the Sagamore Institute, writes,

Missional church leaders know that the church is formed of both the “gathered” and the “scattered.” They affirm that ministry is not solely about what happens inside the four walls of the church; in fact, it’s usually much more about what happens outside them. They don’t make the mistake of defining ministry as “church work.” Therefore, they affirm laypeople in the ministries that they have in and through their “secular” jobs.<sup>199</sup>

Pastors encourage such thinking by the way they conceive of and speak of ministry. As the Reverend Tim Keller said, “In a ‘missional’ situation, lay people renewing and transforming the culture through distinctly Christian vocations must be lifted up as real ‘kingdom work’ and ministry along with the traditional ministry of the Word.”<sup>200</sup> That is one of the ways pastors lead their congregations into the community for the sake of the community. Another, according to Reggie McNeal, is by looking “for ways to bless and

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<sup>197</sup> Wright, 179.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>199</sup> Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 102.

<sup>200</sup> Timothy J. Keller, “The Missional Church,” (2001). [http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Missional\\_Church-Keller.pdf](http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Missional_Church-Keller.pdf) (accessed February 4, 2013).

to serve the communities where they are located,”<sup>201</sup> seeing themselves, in other words, as sent to the whole community, not simply to the congregation that employs them.

Wright put it this way: “Where are we sent? Into the world, said Jesus, just as the Father had sent him into the world.”<sup>202</sup> Indeed, to think otherwise, is to believe and promote a gospel that only focuses on half of the story. For, as Amy Sherman writes,

The story told of the Christian’s life in the too-narrow gospel does not capture this awesome reality and privilege that we—saved sinners—are part of God’s plan to heal the world. The too-narrow gospel tells us what we’ve been saved *from*: sin, hell and death. And that is very good news indeed. But the gospel of the kingdom tells us not only what we’re saved from, but also what we’re saved *for*. We have a purpose, we have a sacred calling, we have a God-given vocation: to partner with God in his work of restoring all things.<sup>203</sup>

Such thinking and doing is the calling of God’s shepherds. Moreover, if the sheep are to follow, they must be so led.

### **The Effectiveness of the Pastor**

In a 1983 article exploring the unique struggles and joys of pastoring congregations of less than one hundred, Marshall Shelley wrote,

Pastoring a small church, like driving a subcompact, can make you feel inferior. You’re buffeted by passing eighteen-wheelers, the turbulence making control difficult. Luxury cars cut you off, and their drivers never look back. You feel fragile, unnoticed, insignificant—until you start to look around. Then you realize how many smaller models there are. They’re everywhere.<sup>204</sup>

Indeed, they are everywhere. As the NCS found, the number of small churches in America is not in decline, despite the proliferation of the mega-church. What is in

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<sup>201</sup> McNeal, 7.

<sup>202</sup> Wright, 221.

<sup>203</sup> Sherman, 87.

<sup>204</sup> Shelley: 38.



decline, all too often, is the confidence of small church pastors to press on in the face of discouragement. Ron Klassen and John Koessler, both small church pastors, have identified five debilitating myths that must be rejected. Two are particularly helpful. The first is “the numbers myth,” which says, “to be significant, a ministry must be big.” The second is “the big place myth,” which says, “to be significant, my ministry must be in a big place.”<sup>205</sup> All small church pastors are tempted to believe the first myth; many are tempted to believe the second. For, as Francis Schaeffer wrote in his essay *No Little People, No Little Places*,

Nowhere more than in America are Christians caught in the twentieth-century syndrome of size. Size will show success. If I am consecrated, there will necessarily be large quantities of people, dollars, etc. This is not so. Not only does God not say that size and spiritual power go together, but He even reverses this (especially in the teaching of Jesus) and tells us to be deliberately careful not to choose a place too big for us.<sup>206</sup>

Henri Nouwen agreed: “The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross.”<sup>207</sup> Such thinking is counter-cultural, some would even say indicative of laziness or a lack of ambition. Surely, pastors who are concerned with the growth of the kingdom are concerned to see their churches grow numerically. Surely, no pastor is satisfied to see a congregation languish or, worse, decline. Yet, some congregations do, despite every effort to cast vision, to revive or rejuvenate. What is one

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<sup>205</sup> Ron Klassen and John Koessler, *No Little Places: The Untapped Potential of the Small-Town Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 20-21.

<sup>206</sup> Schaeffer, 9.

<sup>207</sup> Nouwen, 62.

to conclude when this happens? Is the problem with the leadership? Is there sin in the camp? Perhaps, though not necessarily.

Often the problem is with expectations. The assumption, as Schaeffer said, is that a consecrated life will result in success, as defined by numerical growth. But, as Klassen and Koessler point out, “The notion that Peter or Jesus was ‘successful’ when many people responded positively to a sermon or ‘a failure’ when most rejected the message is totally foreign to Scripture.”<sup>208</sup> Moreover, “Scripture calls us to servanthood, humility, faithfulness, and right motives. It does not call us to produce big numbers. God expects us to be faithful in carrying out our calls, leaving the results to him.”<sup>209</sup> As Eugene Peterson said,

The pastors’ task is to guide the growth of the thirty-seven (if that is where they find themselves) or the thirty-seven hundred (if that be the place) by leading in prayers, preaching God’s word, and administering abilities and aptitudes of the Spirit so that ministry takes place. The plain biblical fact is that it makes no difference if there are ten persons in a cavernous gothic city church or five hundred persons crowded in a suburban barn. It is the kind of difference between tenth-century Jerusalem and seventh-century Samaria—the communities contrast in size and condition but are constituted by the same means (the Holy Spirit) and require the same ministries (worship, prayer, teaching, preaching).<sup>210</sup>

Some would agree in principle, though they would insist on the importance of stratagems for growth. To this, Peterson counters,

Advertising techniques, promotional budgets, and organizational charts are bagatelles in such work. They are, it is argued, useful tools to assist the pastoral work. In fact they are enormous distractions. They absorb, like giant sponges, the energies that ought to go into prayer; they dilute concentration in worship; they clutter preaching. The results are often financially pleasing and organizationally

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<sup>208</sup> Klassen and Koessler, 24.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 212.

satisfying, but the consequences for the faith community are sad, for the essential work of community-building has been abandoned.<sup>211</sup>

Wright put it more simply: “[I]n the end, what God sends will achieve God’s purpose. For it is *God, not the messenger*, who is in control of outcomes.”<sup>212</sup> It is important, then, to remember this, so say these authors, especially in a success-driven culture where many would have pastors believe that numerical growth can be assured, so long as the right tools are employed. “Propagandists are abroad in the land,” Peterson writes, “lying to us about what congregations are and can be. They are lying for money. They want to make us discontent with what we are doing so we will buy a solution from them that they promise will restore virility to our impotent congregations.”<sup>213</sup> It is tempting for small church pastors to put their hope in such promises and stratagems rather than in God.

These, however, are not the only reasons ministers struggle with feelings of failure. One of the problems with effectiveness in pastoring is that there is great confusion about what pastoral ministry is and how it should be done. Peterson writes,

The pastoral vocation in America is embarrassingly banal. It is banal because it is pursued under the canons of job efficiency and career management. It is banal because it is reduced to the dimensions of a job description. It is banal because it is an idol—a call from God exchanged for an offer by the devil for work that can be measured and manipulated at the convenience of the worker.<sup>214</sup>

Peterson illustrates the depth and breadth of this confusion when he writes,

For several decades now, under the influence of the myth of progress and in ignorance of craft, the term *pastor* has been a gunnysack into which all sorts of tinker’s damns have been thrown. We run all over town, from committee to

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 212-13.

<sup>212</sup> Wright, 208.

<sup>213</sup> Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*, 17.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 5.

committee, conference to conference, organization to organization, doing all manner of good work, scattering seed in everybody's field but our own. Very often our reason for doing this is that it seems more important than the humble task we have in our own parish; it seems more urgent, and it certainly gets more publicity.<sup>215</sup>

Pastors, longing to know that they are accomplishing something, are easily given to such activities. Peterson, however, suggests that there is a better way:

But if we can discipline ourselves to our parish, our congregation, we will find something better. Teilhard de Chardin was not a pastor but a scientist. He gave, though, accurate witness to pastoral experience when he wrote, "I discovered that there could be a deep satisfaction in working in obscurity—like leaven, or a microbe. In some way, it seems to me you become more intimately a part of the world."<sup>216</sup>

The better way, according to Peterson, is found in giving oneself to that place of obscurity and to the people who dwell there. And toward what end? Peterson answers the question by describing his own sense of call:

I want to be a pastor. I want to lead people in worship each Lord's Day in such a way that they will be brought into something large and beautiful—into God and his salvation (not reduced or cramped or demeaned). And I want to be with them through the days of the week at those times when they need verification or clarification of God's continuing work and will in their lives (not promoting sure-fire moral schemes, not bullying them into churchly conformity) so that they can live originally and praisingly.<sup>217</sup>

Simple, yet consequential work. It is no wonder that John Murray, in an ordination sermon based on Jeremiah's call to the ministry, reminded the ordinand of "the greatness of the responsibility, the magnitude of the task, the dignity of the office, the deep sense of [one's] own insufficiency and, above all, the majesty and glory of the God [whom one

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 173.

serves].”<sup>218</sup> The pastoral ministry, regardless of the size of one’s congregation, is an extraordinary calling.

### **Leadership Effectiveness**

The final area of literature explored concerns leadership effectiveness. Here the researcher was interested in learning what the church and the marketplace are saying about effectiveness, how it is measured, and what criteria make for an effective leader. As with the other areas of literature, the authors on leadership effectiveness do not directly answer the questions that guided this research, though their work does tangentially touch on the issues at hand, including the difficulties that attend the way of effective leadership and how those difficulties are overcome.

As stated earlier, the cultural assumption is that “leaders are people who ‘get things done’ and ‘make things happen.’”<sup>219</sup> This is certainly what churches expect of their pastors and what pastors expect of themselves. How, then, do leaders lead effectively? How do they get things done? According to leadership experts James Kouzes and Barry Posner, leaders do so with and through others by modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, urging their constituents to take risks, enabling them to act, and encouraging them when they do.<sup>220</sup> Professors Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky agree, though they add that leaders must also have a “balcony perspective,”<sup>221</sup> that is, they must be able to see themselves objectively, as part of the larger whole; for without such perspective, leaders

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<sup>218</sup> Murray, 175.

<sup>219</sup> Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*, 5.

<sup>220</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2007), 15-22.

<sup>221</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 53.

“are likely to misperceive the situation and make the wrong diagnosis,” which can lead to “misguided decisions.”<sup>222</sup>

These are helpful suggestions, but far from a guarantee of effectiveness. On the contrary, what is guaranteed is difficulty, for, as Heifetz and Linsky admit, “Exercising leadership can get you into a lot of trouble,”<sup>223</sup> especially given the plethora of expectations constituents or, in this case, congregants have of their leaders. Indeed, it is not for nothing that a pastor’s life has been likened to “a stray dog at a whistler’s convention.”<sup>224</sup> Many in the church think they know best what pastors should do and how they should spend their time. Indeed, the expectations of others greatly complicate leadership effectiveness in the church, particularly when a pastor is seeking to make change. As Heifetz and Linsky have said, “Asking people to leave behind something they have lived with for years or for generations practically invites them to get rid of you. Sometimes leaders are taken out simply because they do not appreciate the sacrifice they are asking from others.”<sup>225</sup> Change, especially adaptive change, which requires new ways of thinking as well as new ways of doing, can be particularly hard on those invested in the status quo. The familiar is often preferable to the unfamiliar, and certainly where pastoral leadership is concerned. Yet, as Heifetz and Linsky have also said, “Without the willingness to challenge people’s expectations of you, there is no way you can escape

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>224</sup> Jim Herrington, R. Robert Creech, and Trisha Taylor, *The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2003), 15.

<sup>225</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 93-94.

being dominated by the social system and its inherent limits.”<sup>226</sup> Perhaps this is why they add that “exercising leadership might be understood as disappointing people at a rate they can absorb”<sup>227</sup> or “finding a way to disappoint people without pushing them completely over the edge.”<sup>228</sup> This is not the work to which most pastors aspire, but it is the work that must be done if change is to occur.

Jim Herrington, Robert Creech, and Trisha Taylor, experts in human behavior, mention another complicating factor, namely, that “congregations are living systems. We are emotionally wired together with our brothers and sisters in the family of God...Our behavior and choices affect each other in ways of which we are often unaware.”<sup>229</sup> And, of course, pastors are part of those living systems; for better or for worse, they, too, are affected by others’ responses to their leadership. As Herrington, Creech, and Taylor write,

According to systems theory, two variables work in tandem in every emotional system, governing its function. One is *the level of emotional maturity* of the people in the system and of the leadership in particular. The other is *the level of anxiety and tension* to which the system is subject. The greater the level of emotional maturity in a system, the better equipped it is to handle a spike in the level of anxiety when one comes. The higher the level of emotional maturity, the lower the level of constant and chronic anxiety.<sup>230</sup>

Self-understanding and emotional maturity, then, are very important, for pastoral ministry is often stressful. An effective leader is a calm and steady leader.

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>228</sup> Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>229</sup> Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, 33.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

A third complicating factor is a minister's own need for meaning and significance.

As Herrington, Creech, and Taylor point out,

Even leaders are not immune to looking for meaning in the externals. As the spiritual role model in the church, it is tempting to focus on what our lives look like, rather than on what is really going on inside. We measure our significance by the size of our congregations or by how well we are liked or by how highly we are thought of in the community. At workshops and seminars, we are offered a quick fix—three easy steps to church growth, five ways to reduce stress. Or we can buy books and tapes that promise to transform our ministry into a wildly successful one if we only try harder and follow the program.<sup>231</sup>

This can lead to what Dr. Douglas Rumford calls soul neglect, which is common among pastors. As Herrington, Creech, and Taylor write, “We grow busier and busier to please more and more people. We spend more time in meetings than we do in prayer... We study Scripture, but we do it for other people... Our hearts are often thirsty for a word from God... We faithfully minister to the spiritual needs of others and teach ourselves to be content with the leftovers.”<sup>232</sup>

What is the solution to soul neglect? According to Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, the solution is soul care. For, as they put it,

[T]he pastor who has faced his own fear of failure in times of solitude is less afraid when a family threatens to leave the church. The minister who has discerned the will of God for her church through soul-searching prayer is less at the mercy of others' agendas. The [spiritual] disciplines help us train to live the kind of life we truly want to live. Regular practice of a variety of spiritual disciplines also helps us to be the kind of leader we want to be: mature, well-differentiated, and focused.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 130-31.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 133.



“It is not enough,” they add, “to want to be mature or to learn a way of appearing mature to others. True maturity comes from pursuing ‘training in godliness’ (1 Timothy 4:7).

This is the role of the spiritual disciplines in our lives.”<sup>234</sup>

These disciplines or “holy habits,”<sup>235</sup> as they also call them, begin with journaling, which encourages pastors to live examined lives. “A journal is a window into our soul, illuminating our feelings and motives. It offers a place to explore our beliefs and values so that we can determine whether we are living consistently with them. Most important, the habit of reflection that a journal cultivates is often the first step toward learning to see the invisible.”<sup>236</sup>

Next comes the importance of practicing the presence of God. That is, learning to see God at work throughout the day, rather than assigning a part of our day to him.<sup>237</sup> As Pastor Mark Buchanan writes, “The problem is not that God is distant and needs to be wooed or badgered into coming near; the problem is that God is ever present, ever near, and that some of us seek ways of escape...God does not need to be invoked, we do. We need to be called to our senses, to be as present to God as God is to us.”<sup>238</sup> The aim is to “train ourselves to hold still, to run toward [God], not away, to have the scales fall from our eyes, and always, everywhere, to behold Him...[for] when we practice the presence

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>238</sup> Mark Buchanan, *Your God Is Too Safe: Rediscovering the Wonder of a God You Can't Control* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 2001), 139.

of God, we train ourselves to desire His presence—to resist our temptation to flee Him.”<sup>239</sup>

The third discipline Herrington, Creech, and Taylor commend to pastors is the practice of dedicating a day each month to reflective scripture reading and prayer.

Creech, who spends his day at a retreat center, writes,

I usually begin the day by reading and praying from the Psalms and seeking to become aware of God’s presence. I then take my journal and write down as much as I can of what is on my mind, troubling me, stirring my anxiety. Writing it down helps me to objectify it and get it out of the way for a while. My intent is to clear my own agenda and be able to hear God’s voice through Scripture and prayer. Often, about midmorning, I meet with a retreat director for an hour or so to talk about what I’ve brought to the day in the way of needs and expectations, and to receive some guidance about how the remainder of the day might be spent.

Most days of prayer like these include a long walk, a short nap, and some spiritual reading from writers such as Henri Nouwen, Eugene Peterson, and Richard Foster. Around 4:00 P.M., I end the day by writing again, gathering my thoughts and directions of the day into the pages of my journal.

Nothing profound has come from any of these days over the past couple of years. Some would look upon them as a waste of time, time that ought to have been spent in a hundred other more visible activities.

But something profound has come from the accumulation of all those days. I have learned more about being still and trusting God to work in my life, my family, and my congregation. I have learned that the other work of the pastorate is going to get done, regardless. But prayer is not attended to unless I create space for it in my life. I have learned that no one is going to check up on me and see if I am giving time to prayer; I, nevertheless, need to do so. I have learned that away from the voices and noises of the congregation it is easier to take a more objective look at what is transpiring and to enter it with a greater degree of peace and calmness that has come from taking hold of God’s hand in prayer and solitude. By practicing the spiritual disciplines regularly and faithfully, I have seen God begin to transform my life from the inside out.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, 139.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 140-41.

This discipline, along with the other two, are meant to quench the thirst in pastors' souls; to strengthen their faith in God, in whose name they minister; to tenderize their hearts to the temptations and failures of others, for they themselves are acquainted with both; and to prepare them for the opposition and criticism they will encounter as they seek to lead God's people.

What is an effective leader? According to Herrington, Creech and Taylor, an effective leader "is a person who has the capacity to know and do the right things."<sup>241</sup> "Given the powerful influence that relationships exercise in our lives," however, "doing the right thing can sometimes be much more difficult than knowing the right thing to do."<sup>242</sup> Hence the need for such holy habits.

This, however, still leaves the question of how pastoral effectiveness is measured. Is it calculated by the size of one's congregation, by a church's concern for the lost, by the godliness of its members, or by some other means? Indeed, can pastoral effectiveness be truly measured? Heifetz and Linsky, addressing leadership in the marketplace, which is even more conscious of numerical growth than the church is, question whether it can:

We have rarely met a human being who, after years of professional life, has not bought into the myth of measurement and been debilitated by it. After all, there is powerful pressure in our culture to measure the fruits of our labours, and we feel enormous pride as we take on "greater" responsibility and gain "greater" authority, wealth, and prestige. And well we should, to a degree. But using measurement as a device is not the same as believing that measurement captures the essential value of anything. You cannot measure the good that you do.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>243</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 213-14.

Applied to the church, Heifetz and Linsky's point is that the essential value of pastoral labor and, thereby, pastoral effectiveness is measured not by the benchmarks that can be seen. As helpful as they may be, they offer no conclusive evidence of success, for they can lead to a false sense of confidence just as easily as they can lead to a false sense of failure. The good that a pastor does cannot be decisively measured by such means.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success. Four literature areas were identified that are important to understanding how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success: biblical-theological; Puritan notables and their spiritual descendants, particularly those who pastored small churches; twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors on the character and work of the pastor in general and the challenges of small church ministry in particular; and contemporary writers on leadership effectiveness. These important areas provided a foundation for the four research questions that guided this study:

1. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness?
  - a. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of their ministry priorities?
  - b. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of their sense of call?
  - c. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of successful completion of goals?
2. How do pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness?
3. What do pastors of small churches think others expect of their ministry?

- a. What do pastors of small churches think members expect of their ministry?
  - b. What do pastors of small churches think elders expect of their ministry?
4. How do the expectations of others affect the way pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness?

This study of the literature has shown that small churches are served by solo pastors who bear the primary responsibility for the success or failure of the church. When churches fail to grow, ministers can easily become discouraged and question their effectiveness as pastors. Pastors who overcome these feelings and doubts have valuable experiences that can help those seeking to grow in their acceptance of God's call and their ability to evaluate their effectiveness in it. Therefore, a qualitative study was used to understand how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness.

### **Design of the Study**

The research design of this study followed a qualitative approach. Professor Sharan B. Merriam, in *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, said that “qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”<sup>244</sup> In this study, therefore, qualitative research provided the researcher an opportunity to understand and learn from the experiences of pastors who have faithfully served in small churches for several years.

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<sup>244</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2009), 13.

Merriam referred to four characteristics that are important to understanding the nature of qualitative research: first, “the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning;” second, “the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis;” third, “the process is inductive;” and fourth, “the product is richly descriptive.”<sup>245</sup> These characteristics are well-suited for understanding how pastors of small churches overcome the questions and doubts that attend such ministry.

Pastors who have served small churches for several years have unique experiences that can help other ministers who find themselves in similar situations. Because the purpose of this study was to understand a process, qualitative research permitted the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of small church pastors, how they came to embrace their call and how they evaluate their effectiveness in it. Since each pastor is unique, as is each pastoral setting, the experiences of small church pastors naturally vary. However, since the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the researcher was able to adapt to the varied responses and, as Merriam said, “explore unusual or unanticipated responses.”<sup>246</sup> Further, “rather than deductively testing hypotheses,”<sup>247</sup> the researcher endeavored to explore what was yet unknown in the experiences of the pastors interviewed and then looked for common themes and inductively drew conclusions. Finally, since qualitative research is “richly descriptive,”<sup>248</sup> the researcher took note of phrases used and narratives recounted

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 16.

by those interviewed, which gave greater meaning to the experiences conveyed and the lessons learned.

### **Participant Sample Selection**

In order to gain meaningful data for this study, the researcher interviewed eight ministers who have served the same small church for seven or more years. This duration of time was selected so as to assure that the pastors interviewed would have had sufficient opportunity to evaluate their ministry effectiveness in light of the struggles that attend such ministry. A small church, as mentioned above, was defined by this researcher as a congregation served by a solo pastor whose livelihood is derived from one's ministerial labors. Such congregations ranged in size from as few as forty-five to as many as 160 regular participants.

Further, the researcher limited the interview pool to Protestant ministers serving churches in the Reformed tradition. In order to limit variables that are not of interest for this analysis, it was important that all participants in the study hold similar theological convictions regarding the sovereignty of God and the nature of the church, since these might greatly influence a minister's response to God's call and the way one evaluates effectiveness. The extent to which those variables actually had an impact was borne out in the research.

Finally, the researcher interviewed pastors from diverse regions of the United States: four from Missouri, and one each from Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Washington state. It was the researcher's hope that geographic diversity would contribute



to the richness of the data collected, thereby providing for a wide variation of cultural context within the United States.

### **Data Collection**

In seven cases, the researcher either traveled to the churches where the interview participants serve or met them at central locations. In one case, the interview was conducted by telephone. The interviews took between one and one and a half hours, depending on the breadth and depth of the experiences the pastors shared.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, which, according to Merriam, is based on “flexibly worded” questions, which “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic.”<sup>249</sup> The advantage to such a format is that it gave the researcher the flexibility to adapt and respond in order to get to the most helpful data. The following questions served as the interview protocol:

1. Tell me about a typical week in your ministry. (i.e., How do you spend your time?)
2. How do you decide from week to week what to do in your ministry?
3. What is your sense of call to the work you are in? (i.e., How do you know God wants you here?)
4. Tell me about a time when you came to the end of a week and felt satisfied that you had accomplished your goals.
5. Tell me about a time when you felt your ministry was not effective.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 90.

6. How do you know from week to week or year to year if your ministry is having the effect you hope it will have?
7. How would your members describe a successful ministry year for you?
  - a. Probing: How would that be the same or different for the elders?
8. Tell me about a time when others' expectations of you were in conflict with your priorities and sense of call?
  - a. Probing: How did you respond to those conflicting expectations?
  - b. Probing: How did those expectations affect you?
9. If you could have any information to show that your ministry was highly effective and successful, what information would you like to know?

Because the interviews followed a semi-structured format, the order of the questions varied and, in some cases, some questions were left out entirely, depending on the interview and the direction it took. Finally, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed immediately following the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

As soon as possible, the researcher studied the transcriptions of the interviews using the constant comparative method, which, according to Merriam, “involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences.”<sup>250</sup> Merriam writes, “Data are grouped together...[and] tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data. These patterns are arranged in relationship to each other in the building of a grounded

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 30.

theory.”<sup>251</sup> That is, “a theory that emerges from, or is ‘grounded’ in, the data.”<sup>252</sup> Using the constant comparative method, the researcher was able to analyze the experiences of one small church pastor in comparison to other small church pastors from a variety of perspectives, thereby making sense of those experiences and suggesting a theory about how small church pastors learn to embrace God’s call and how they evaluate their effectiveness in it.

### **Researcher’s Position**

Since in qualitative studies the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, all observations and analysis are filtered through the researcher’s perspectives and values. Therefore, researchers must be aware of how their own bias or subjectivity shapes the research process. Moreover, as Merriam writes, the researcher’s “assumptions, experiences, worldviews, and theoretical orientation”<sup>253</sup> should be identified and stated up front.

The researcher who conducted this study has served as the solo pastor of a church of approximately seventy-five regular attenders for the past nine years. Prior to that, the researcher was an associate pastor of a church of over two thousand regular attenders for ten years, and the pastor of a church of 250 regular attenders for nine years. Given this experience and choice to serve a small congregation, the researcher acknowledges bias toward small churches, where it is easier for a pastor to know one’s flock and have personal relationships with the sheep. This bias might color the researcher’s perspective if

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 219.

the pastors interviewed served churches of more diverse size. But since all the pastors interviewed serve small churches, the researcher does not believe this was a problem.

It is further worth noting that the researcher serves a Presbyterian church in the Reformed tradition, which accounts for the researcher's interest in interviewing pastors who hold similar theological convictions.

### **Study Limitations**

Given that only eight pastors were interviewed, that they all come from the Protestant and Reformed tradition, and that the researcher had limited resources and time to invest in the collection of data, it must be acknowledged that the conclusions that were drawn do not necessarily have universal application to every situation. Yet, despite this fact, the researcher believes the data collected will prove useful in providing perspective and help to those who serve small churches.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA REPORT AND ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success. Four research questions were framed to guide the study. The research questions were:

1. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness?
  - a. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of their ministry priorities?
  - b. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of their sense of call?
  - c. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of successful completion of goals?
2. How do pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness?
3. What do pastors of small churches think others expect of their ministry?
  - a. What do pastors of small churches think members expect of their ministry?
  - b. What do pastors of small churches think elders expect of their ministry?
4. How do the expectations of others affect the way pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness?

In this chapter, the participants of the study will be introduced and their insights concerning the study questions will be presented.

### **The Study Participants**

Eight ministers were interviewed, each of whom has served as the solo pastor of a small Reformed congregation for at least seven years. The participants hailed from five states: four from Missouri, and one each from Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Washington. Six serve in rural communities of three thousand to thirteen thousand people, while two serve in suburban areas of approximately one million people. Four are serving their first church (three of whom planted it), and four are serving their second church.

Aaron is sixty-two years old. He serves the same suburban church he planted thirty-one years ago. The church has 150 regular attenders and is Aaron's first church.

Bob is sixty-one years old. For the past twenty-six years he has served a rural church in a town of ten thousand people. The church is thirty-four years old, has 125 regular attenders and, other than the church planter, has had no other pastor. It is Bob's second church.

Charles is sixty years old. For the past twenty-four years he has served a rural church in a town of ten thousand people. The church is forty years old, has 160 regular attenders, and is Charles's second church.

Duane is fifty-eight years old. For the past twenty-two years he has served a rural church in a town of five thousand people. The church is 175 years old, has one hundred regular attenders, and is Duane's second church.

Ed is fifty-five years old. He serves the same rural church, in a town of three thousand people, that he planted eleven years ago. The congregation has 115 regular attenders and is Ed's first church.

Frank is fifty years old. He serves a suburban church he planted ten years ago. The church has seventy-five regular attenders and is Frank's second church.

Gabe is forty-five years old. For the past seven and a half years he has served a rural church in a town of thirteen thousand people. The church is 170 years old, has seventy regular attenders, and is Gabe's first church.

Hal is fifty-six years old. For the past seven years he has served a rural church in a town of four thousand people. The church is 145 years old, has forty-five regular attenders, and is Hal's first church.

### **How Do Pastors of Small Churches Describe Their Ministry Effectiveness?**

While this researcher was interested in learning how pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of their ministry priorities, their sense of call, and the successful completion of goals, the responses the participants gave suggested that little differentiation was made between the three. That is, since their ministry priorities and goals grow out of their sense of call, the participants described ministry effectiveness in terms of the accomplishment of those goals, which fell into five areas: nurturing one's own soul, preaching for the perfection of the saints, shepherding the flock, growing and maturing Christians, and touching the surrounding community.

### **Nurturing One's Own Soul**

When asked to describe ministry effectiveness, Duane named a number of priorities, but then added, "My own spiritual life has to be first. If I ignore that, I have nothing to offer others. That's why I am disciplined about personal Bible study and try to stretch my mind by reading challenging books that anchor my soul and help me grow." Hal concurred, describing how he tries to apply the Bible to his own life before making application to others: "I've told my congregation that there have been many times when I'm studying a passage of scripture that I've literally fallen to my knees in my office and asked for forgiveness. 'God, I need to hear this before they do.'" For Duane and Hal, effective ministry begins with their own hearts, for they can only lead their flocks as far as they themselves have gone.

### **Preaching for the Perfection of the Saints**

Ministry effectiveness was also described in terms of preaching that perfects the saints. Hal expressed the sentiment of several respondents when he said, "I see my primary responsibility as preaching the word. That trumps everything!" Reflecting on his call to the pastorate, Frank said, "When I was in seminary, I just had this sense that God was calling me to preach. There was this stirring in my bones and woe to me if I didn't do it." Moreover, the preaching these men felt called to was purposeful preaching. As Hal expressed it, "The catechism teaches that we are to be about gathering and perfecting the saints, helping them grow in Christ, which God accomplishes through the word and the other means of grace." Aaron agreed: "When I preach, I want more than a compliment; I want to know that my sermons are helpful, that my preaching and teaching are helping



people to know the Lord better and follow him and understand and wonder at the complexities of his word.” Or, as Frank said, “As a result of my preaching, I want my people to love God more, to understand his love for them and how that impacts their lives. I want them to mature in Christ.”

### **Shepherding the Flock**

Ministry effectiveness was also described by some of the respondents as the providing of adequate care and counsel and oversight of members. This included, among other things, the need for church discipline. Both Bob and Gabe spoke of occasions where this was required. Bob reported that

Recently we’ve had two really difficult situations in our church, where men have been involved in affairs. Heartbreaking situations. Discipline was instituted in one case, which some in the church criticized. But then God worked. We saw these men come to their senses, saw them return to their wives and to the Lord. It was exciting to see God turn these hopeless situations around, and to know that he used our meager efforts in the process.

Such shepherding efforts, of course, do not always have happy endings. In Gabe’s case, the church discipline he and the Session instituted resulted in some families siding with those censured and eventually leaving the church—a church that, because of its size, could scarcely afford to lose any members.

Aaron recalled a similarly difficult situation, though the circumstances were quite different:

I got a phone call from the son of a congregant, who told me that he had gotten his non-Christian girlfriend pregnant. He was trying to figure out what to do. He wasn’t sure whether to marry her. She didn’t want to have the baby; she was considering abortion. I spent countless hours talking with the couple and with the young man’s parents. I went through the crisis with him, holding him accountable, regardless of her being a non-Christian. They ended up deciding to get married and to keep the child. And eventually she became a Christian. What a joy it was to

be able to help this couple and this infant child they nearly killed... Today they are having a very fruitful ministry in our church.

Situations such as these are well beyond any minister's capabilities. It takes God to change hearts. For that reason, Hal prays at least an hour a day for the members of his church; he prays for them by name and by specific need. As he put it, "My priorities are prayer for the flock and preparation for the sermon; everything else flows out of that." Put another way, the shepherding that matters most is done by the chief Shepherd himself, as his under-shepherds serve the sheep in dependence upon him.

### **Growing and Maturing Christians**

Several of the respondents also described ministry effectiveness in terms of individuals' growth and maturity. In Frank's case, Abe, an elderly member who recently died, came to mind: "I asked Abe, just before I left for vacation, 'What are you looking forward to most about heaven?' Without skipping a beat, he said, 'Worshiping God as he deserves to be worshiped. There'll be no more sin, no more of me interfering with that.'"

Abe's answer was indicative of such growth and maturity and no doubt evidence of Frank's influence in his life. "That's what I would like to hear from all of our members," Frank said, "that our pastor taught us the Bible and gave us a vision of God that made us want to know and love and live for Christ more." Doubtless this is what every minister would like to hear.

Of course, such growth is a process. It does not happen overnight. That is why Frank also spoke of the joy of the "ah ha!" moments, when parishioners "start getting it," "when the gospel begins to take root and someone says, 'Oh, now I see how it relates to my forgiving my father, or not having bitterness toward that person, or how I should use

my money...’ When I see people connecting the dots, when I see the penny drop, I know it is all worth it.” These are the moments pastors live for, when God’s people begin to understand and believe and obey.

### **Touching the Surrounding Community**

Ministry effectiveness was also described in terms of their members, individually and collectively, reaching out to bless the communities around them—what Hal said the catechism calls “gathering the saints.” For example, Charles told of how his church offers a class three times a month for recently paroled men and women. “We teach them how to interview for jobs and prepare them to deal with their felony records.” The classes always provide an opportunity to share the gospel, but that is not the only, or even primary reason the church offers them. The community has a high number of ex-cons and, as part of the community, the congregation wants to help.

In Ed’s case, the church he planted is across the county line from the mother-church, in an area known to be economically challenged. Upon arriving, what he and those sent with him discovered was shocking. The town was far more impoverished than they had been told, it suffered from a high incidence of methamphetamine use, and it was filled with broken families. In many ways, it was the last place one would expect a church to take root. Yet, one by one, beginning with Ed and his wife, the members of the core group sold their homes, moved into the community, and began to reach out in love and friendship to those around them. Over the years, several of their neighbors have come to faith. The church’s motto is “Changed Hearts, Changed Lives, Changed Community.” One of the ways they seek to live it out is through a relationship they have developed

with the local high school, which has thirty-one homeless students. As Ed described the situation, “The students just kind of flop at houses, so we’ve worked it out with the school so that we give each one a backpack and some food, a pillow and a tooth brush and other things, so that they won’t feel as needy when they flop at friends’ and relatives’ houses.” Ed’s congregation may never know how their acts of mercy have been used by God, but that does not matter; they delight in offering them, for they have been blessed and have been called to be a blessing to others.

### **How Do Pastors of Small Churches Evaluate Their Ministry Effectiveness?**

Not surprisingly, most of the respondents’ answers to the second question were closely related to their answers to the first question. That is, they largely evaluated the effectiveness of their ministries by whether their preaching and shepherding were resulting in spiritual life and growth in their members, and whether those members were reaching out to those around them.

### **Spiritual Life and Growth**

Charles, for example, said that “one of the big evidences of effectiveness is lives that are transformed, people taking their place in the body of Christ, loving and caring for one another, strengthening, growing, and producing works of service.” Though he was also quick to add, “But even then, one can never be sure, for things are not always as they appear.” Ed agreed, noting that it is God’s responsibility to work in people’s lives: “Fruit is not my deal; it’s the Lord’s deal.” Genuine change can only be brought about by God.

Even so, several of the respondents spoke of how God had used them and what an encouragement that had been. Charles, for example, said,

Last Sunday, as I was greeting people before the service began, I welcomed this twenty-four year old girl and her family who attend our church—a very troubled family. As I spoke with them, what struck me was the peace and reconciliation that God had brought about. Not long before this, the girl had come to me, asking how to trust Christ. I suspect she was already Christian but had lost her assurance. We talked then, and now here she was, standing before me, beaming, with her family at her side. Those are the kinds of things I live for.

Bob told a similar story:

I met with a woman recently who had been attending one of our women's Bible studies. She said to me, "Pastor Bob, the ladies in the Bible study have something I don't have; and I don't know what it is." This woman had come from a solid, evangelical church back east. Nevertheless, I said to her, "I think you're talking about the personal relationship with Christ that these women have." She asked, "How can I have that kind of relationship with Jesus?" "Well, do you pray?" I asked. "Do you read God's word? Do you talk with Jesus during the day? Is he on your mind and heart?" "He hadn't been," she said, "until I started spending time with a bunch of these ladies. They have all this." What was neat about this situation is that her son came to me a couple weeks later and said, "Bob, I don't think you realize what the Lord did through you. I believe my mom became a Christian when she met with you." Those things don't happen every day; but when they do, I say, "Thanks Lord. I needed that."

Ed gave still another example: "I couldn't believe it when twenty-one men in our church came to a men's breakfast to talk about pornography and how it is tearing up our families. I couldn't believe anyone showed up for that." Yet they did, and through it came the help and accountability that many needed.

Changed and changing lives: that is what all the respondents spoke of when asked how they evaluate ministry effectiveness. But, then, that was only half of their answer.

### **Reaching Out to Those Around Them**

The other half of their answer had to do with outreach and ministries of mercy. As Charles said, "I have some measurable goals, very practical things. I look at the church as it's portrayed in the scripture, compare it to my own, and then note areas of lack that I try

to work on. Right now we're working on being more faithful to proclaim the gospel. That's the heart of ministry." Duane called such gospel proclamation "the heart of discipleship" and, though he acknowledged that results are God's business, suggested that one of the indicators of effective ministry may be whether the church is growing numerically. Gabe admitted the same, though he added that even in the Bible God's servants were met with varying results: "At one point in First Samuel it says that in everything David did God gave him success, whereas Jeremiah was called to a ministry in which both he and his message were rejected." Hal said, "What I have tried to say to the congregation is that we have to be careful not to measure things the way man measures them. If God sends us a lot of people, wonderful. But are *we* growing? Are we being the church God has called us to be?" Put another way, the Lord's "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" is promised to those who are faithful, whether numerical success follows or not.

Some of the respondents commented on how thrilled they are when their members embrace the vision of reaching out. Ed echoed the sentiments of many, when he mused, "I think the greatest satisfaction I receive is when I see my congregation stepping up to share the love of Christ." He then told how one of his lay leaders reached out to a family in the community: "He loved this family, cared for them, served them, and then came to me and said, 'I hope it's okay that I did this. They were in crisis. This is what I said and did...'" Such concern for others is what each of the respondents pray for and long to see.

## **The Pastoral Reality**

Despite such encouraging reports, some pastors also commented on the never ending nature of the work, and that effectiveness always seems to be just beyond their grasp. As Frank put it,

Our work is an ongoing process. One of the great frustrations of being a pastor is that you never come to the end of the path. There are always more people to see, always more ways to handle the text, always better illustrations to use, always a deeper way of looking at a particular issue, always a more gracious way of dealing with a person. If you dwell on that, you'll drive yourself crazy. If I didn't have the sovereignty of God to rest in, if I couldn't say, "Okay, Lord, I'm trusting in you, for you are greater than all of my strengths and all of my weaknesses. You are my refuge and my rock..." If I didn't have that, if all that wasn't true, I would feel utterly hopeless and pastoral ministry would be sheer futility.

God's sovereignty and assurance that even pastoral weakness will not thwart his purposes is a great source of comfort. Reflecting on this fact, Gabe said, "I realize that it's not me and my giftedness that accomplishes the work. It's God's Spirit that has to move.

Remembering this has helped me a lot...God calls me to faithfulness to the word, faithfulness to loving people, and faithfulness not to hold grudges when they don't act the way I think they should." Frank concurred: "Ministry effectiveness is measured by faithfulness and obedience—faithfulness in loving God and coming to him, faithfulness in taking his yoke upon us and learning from him." The work of the pastorate is hard enough; it need not be made harder by thinking that it all depends on the pastor.

## **What Do Pastors of Small Churches Think Others Expect of Their Ministry?**

In this question, the researcher was interested particularly in what pastors of small churches think members and elders expect of their ministry. The answers the respondents

gave were quite varied. They are discussed under two headings: what members expect, and what elders expect.

### **What Members Expect**

Not surprisingly, many pastors said that their members expect spiritual growth to result from their labors. As Bob put it, “I think our people understand that we are committed to the scriptures. The teaching of God’s word is the hallmark of our ministry. But that teaching is also very practical. Through it the church expects to grow in their devotion to Christ and in their love for one another.” For Gabe, however, the expectations of growth were more specific: fewer divorces. Gabe reported that the father of one of his deacons recently said to him, “I’ve been here all my life; my dad was here all of his life, and his dad before him. We’ve had a divorce every now and then. You might hear about it, you might not; but it was rare. Since you’ve been here, all that has changed. We’ve never had so many divorces in the church.” Spiritual health was repeatedly mentioned, though it was not the most commonly voiced response.

Far more often, the pastors spoke of other kinds of growth that is expected of them, particularly numerical growth. “I’m embarrassed to say this,” Frank confessed, “but my members would probably say they expect my ministry to result in more members coming in and more people doing stuff.” Ed agreed: “Numbers, noses, and nickels! That’s what my people expect.” He sadly continued,

I have a number of people asking me why we’re still doing mercy ministry when very few people ever come to church as a result of it? I’m like, “You didn’t hear all the sermons on giving the cold cup of water?” We don’t say they can have this water if they’ll respond to the gospel. We give the water because the water is the gospel, so to speak.



Bob's report was similar: "Some of the people who have left wanted the church to grow by leaps and bounds. It hasn't." Duane expressed the same thing, making light of it to relieve the frustration: "My members want the church to grow by one hundred and not have to do anything for that to happen. They want all the bills paid and the air conditioning kept at seventy degrees." Even Hal, whose ministry is appreciated by most in his church, still offered a melancholy response: "Our members expect me to preach, counsel, and be at the hospital and funeral home. As long as I do those things, most people are happy, though there are some who would say that if I were successful, those who have left would still be with us." The weight of others' expectations and their disappointments when not met dampens the joy many pastors feel over the good God is doing through them.

Interestingly, Charles offered an entirely different response. "The secret of my success," he said, "is to lower the expectations." He was only half joking, however, as the rest of his answer revealed:

If I were to ever write a book it would be one page. I tell my people that the reason I'm their pastor is that they are comfortable with mediocrity. There is a certain amount of truth there, though, and I think it is this: I can't imagine my children at the end of the year evaluating me and saying, "You know, you weren't very effective as a father this year." I don't evaluate my wife that way. We are the body of Christ, which is the family of God, the covenant people of God. I think the church is off base when it imposes a business model on itself, when the pastor becomes the theological technician or the gun for hire... We are the family of God, bringing these lives filled with the Spirit and love for one another, bringing them to bear on living this family life. That's the essence of my ministry. When Paul went to Thessalonica, he was bruised from the beating he had just suffered in the previous town. Yet he said, "I didn't come here trying to be man-pleaser. I came with the gospel. I came to share my life with you." And then he talked about being a father and a mother to them. I think that's the right model for the church.

For Charles, then, the successful pastor is the one who trains his flock to see themselves as a family. With this model, the congregation would place no other expectations on the pastor than to love them well.

### **What Elders Expect**

Given the spiritual maturity required of elders, one might assume that their expectations would differ from the expectations of members. The answers the respondents gave, however, suggested little difference between the two. Three of the pastors reported that their elders' expectations center around the word. As Bob put it, "My elders would say, 'Faithfulness to the scriptures...our pastor always has a biblical principle to teach us, and that is how it should be.'" Duane agreed: "They expect me to visit and to preach the word of God." Gabe said, "They expect me to teach the Bible, to stay grounded in that, not getting distracted by the other things that can bog us down." The word was primary to these elders. Whatever else their pastors do, preaching and teaching must come first.

On the other hand, four of the pastors said that their elders expect results of one sort or another. Frank said that his elders expect members "to toe the line," that is, to live in "peace and harmony" with one another, and that it is his job to promote it. He also said that his elders would consider him a success if "more visitors came and more people joined the church." Hal agreed: "Some on our Session would say nickels and noses; that's what they expect." But that is not all. Hal went on to say,

Some expect the pastor and his family to be everything. It's something I struggle with, and maybe it has something to do with being the solo pastor. For instance, when it's time to put up the Advent decorations, the pastor is the one who's supposed to do that. And if something needs taking care of, you're the one who's

supposed to take care of that... They tend to think, you're the one who's getting paid, so you should do it. I've literally had one elder say to me on a Sunday morning, "There's not enough salt on the sidewalk. Would you take care of that?"... Maybe that's the way it is with small church ministry. We don't fight about it; I just try to be as gracious as I can be.

Hal also mentioned that, though his elders agree that they are to share in the shepherding of the flock, they nevertheless expect him to do all the visiting and calling on people. Ed reported that one of his elders, a business owner, "believes success is numbers, noses and nickels... and that more is always better." And Aaron said, "Maybe more than the congregation, my elders would consider me a success if more people were won to Christ and the church were to grow numerically." Such expectations are felt loud and clear.

Finally, the minority report was offered once again by Charles, who said that his elders are "one with him" in his view of the church as a family. Hence their expectations of him are no different than their expectations of themselves: namely, that he and they live in healthy relationship with the rest of the church family. Ministry flows from that.

### **How Do the Expectations of Others Affect the Way Pastors of Small Churches Evaluate Their Ministry Effectiveness?**

Finally, this researcher was interested in knowing how the expectations of others affect the way pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness. The answers the respondents gave were quite varied. They ran the gamut, from questioning their effectiveness, to moderating their positions, to strengthening their convictions.

#### **Questioning Their Effectiveness**

Aaron, for example, regularly hears that his sermons are too long and too academic. Therefore, he questions whether they are an impediment to others hearing God's voice. He would like to shorten them and make them more practical, but finds it

difficult to do so. Bob has been criticized for his preaching, as well. He reported the following incident:

One of my elders wanted me to share more of my personality; he wanted more funny stories and things like that. I knew he was serious about it, so I allowed him to sit down with the Session and I excused myself so they could have a frank discussion. The Session disagreed with him, and he eventually left the church. But again, it was one of those things: a pastor's preaching can be a very sensitive thing. That is the main aspect of our ministry.

Bob also described a time when several in his church lost confidence in his leadership:

We went through a church discipline situation about ten years ago, which required the Session to excommunicate a member. It was a very difficult situation. Several months later a congregational meeting was held. I don't remember the reason for the meeting, but during it people were still raising questions about the situation. Then one of the members stood up and said, "There are many in this congregation who have lost confidence in our pastor. We would like to vote on whether to retain him." I was flabbergasted and devastated. The Lord helped me through that time, but it required a lot of honest discussions with the Session and a thorough examination of what we had done.

Duane suffered a similar crisis that nearly cost him his job. When his church called him, they knew he had coached high school basketball and track as a means of supplementing the salary his former church had provided. Being small and financially constrained, they too encouraged him to coach and hoped that his involvement in the community would benefit the church. Occasionally a youth or family from the school would attend; but, with the church several miles away, they never saw the sort of growth they had hoped to see. That was okay with Duane, though. God was using him in the lives of students and adults. He was invited to teach a Bible class at the public high school. He was the first one called when there was a student death; and, unfortunately, there were too many over the years. He did several funerals, as well as weddings for students he had earlier coached. He was beloved by them and was a wonderful example of Christ to them. After

eleven years, though, some in his church started to complain. In their view, more members should have been brought in as a result of his coaching, and his involvement with the students was conflicting too much with church activities. The last straw was when Duane's track team qualified for the state meet, which was scheduled for the same Saturday as the annual church yard sale. Duane offered to help with the set up beforehand and the clean up afterwards, but that was unacceptable. A handful of members insisted on a congregational meeting, at which they told Duane, "You're spending too much time with the kids, and those kids aren't coming to our church, so you're helping someone else's kids rather than helping us." They also called for a vote of confidence, which Duane received, but just barely. He thought of resigning. He really wanted to leave. But God would not let him. Instead, he stopped coaching, rededicated himself to loving and serving the church (including his detractors), and waited. It was not easy; he missed the students and the ways God had used him. But coaching, so far as he knew, was no longer to be. As Duane told it,

For a whole year I didn't coach. But that didn't satisfy those who wanted me to leave. They left instead. After they left, the board and several members realized what had happened, that they had been misled and manipulated by the others. They came to me and apologized, and told me that I should keep coaching and that I had their blessing. That was ten years ago. I've been coaching ever since. It's funny, I never had a honeymoon period when I arrived, but in some ways it feels like the last ten years have been one.

For Aaron and Bob and Duane, such criticism, at least for a time, caused them to question their effectiveness.

### **Moderating Their Positions**

Ed told a very different story. “There have been times,” he said, “when my vision would have me pushing us as a church, stretching us financially and taxing us as far as manpower goes. My elders say, ‘You’re asking too much of our people, you’re taking too many risks.’ All I want to do is stretch us—not ruin us, stretch us.” Ed proceeded to illustrate with a story:

Last night at our Session meeting we were talking about our new building. It’s a two-phased project and we’re just about done with phase one. We’re lucky, our debt is only twenty-five percent of our project, which includes the purchase of the land. It used to be a three-phased project, but we knew what we could afford and cut it down to two phases. My question to the Session last night was, “When are we going to start drawing up the plans for phase two?” They said, “Why are you even thinking about that? We’re not even done with phase one yet, and we’ve asked so much of our people already.” I said, “Well, what if somebody comes along and writes a check for the half million dollars we are in debt? We could go out and borrow another \$500,000 and go into phase two immediately. I want to know what phase two would look like, and I want our people to know. We need to give them a vision.” Last night we were at odds over the vision versus the day-to-day kinds of things. My elders are all very busy men, and I respect them; but they are not visionaries; that is a stretch for us.

Ed went on to say that such impassioned force him to compromise, which he is willing to do since he knows that God is in control. His elders’ expectations of his leadership in this regard are different than his own. Hence to be effective in his ministry, he must be patient and moderate his views.

### **Strengthening Their Convictions**

Bob’s story illustrates yet another effect the expectations of others can have on small church pastors’ evaluation of their ministry effectiveness. In this case, the issue that occasioned it was his church’s worship practices:

Some people wanted us to change our worship style, to go more contemporary with our music, thinking that the church would grow by leaps and bounds if we did that. I disagreed and told them that's not who we are, nor who we believe the Lord wants us to be. This isn't the first time such criticism has been voiced. Unfortunately, whenever it has, people have left. That's a hard thing, though through it I've found peace with what we believe and how God has made us.

Frank also told of a time when his convictions required him to disappoint people:

When we first started the church, I had a couple in the core group who were high Ds, real drivers, very accomplished people who were both teaching leaders in Bible Study Fellowship. They were very structured, rules were very important to them, and they brought that mentality into our church. They didn't understand grace and its application to relationships. They said they understood the gospel, but they lived by the law. And they were convinced that our church had to become Redeemer south, and that I had to become like Tim Keller and lead us into a very sophisticated kind of ministry for sophisticated people like them. Well, they grew increasingly frustrated over the years. They tried to mold me into their image of what I should be, and it didn't work. I told them it wasn't going to work. I am who I am.

Such encounters come at great cost to some pastors. Frank continued,

Things like that drain me. They drain me because I want people to like me and agree with me. But, in this case, I had to confront that couple and tell them that I thought it would be best if they left—best for them and best for our church. I'm not afraid to confront people and deal with it. But it's like someone sticking a syringe in my head and sucking all the juice out. It just drains me. Some people thrive on that; it doesn't phase them. But me, if I have a hard conversation, it takes me a while to recoup from that. I love people and don't want to hurt their feelings; I want them to like me and be okay with me, and they don't like me when I have to say hard things to them.

Hal also faced criticism from someone in his church, but for a slightly different reason:

One of the accusations that was put to me was that I was preaching all law; that there was no grace in my sermons. Although I didn't believe it, and don't believe it now, I took several steps to make sure others didn't think so... Since most of my sermons are recorded, I let different pastors in our Presbytery listen to them and tell me what they thought. They disagreed with my critic, which was a comfort to me; it confirmed my own belief. Nevertheless, I was still left with a man in my congregation who believes I'm not preaching as I should.

Aaron told yet another story of conflicting expectations and the effect they have:

We were trying to get First Light ministry off the ground. First Light is a ministry to those struggling with sexual addictions. The ministry began under the leadership of our mother church and was quite effective for several years. Unfortunately, the pastor stepped down and the ministry began to suffer. I suggested to our Session that we pick it up. The Session was in favor of doing so, but some in the congregation weren't so keen on the idea. They wondered what kind of people might end up in our church if we did. And they wondered how my involvement in it might affect my energy and pastoral responsibilities with our congregation. I realized I couldn't neglect that; but neither could I ignore the need this ministry had for leadership.

For Bob, Frank, Hal and Aaron, the criticism they received eventually strengthened their convictions regarding their ministries, what God had called them to do, and how he had gifted them, even though, more often than not, there was still a negative consequence for holding to their conviction.

Finally, it should be noted that Bob spoke appreciatively of the feedback he has received from his Session and the help they have provided him in carrying out his ministry. As he described his situation,

I don't know if it's good or bad, but I have never had a job evaluation as a pastor by the Session, because we do that all the time. An elder will say to me, "I was just visiting so-and-so and they haven't seen you for a month or so. Maybe you ought to visit them." I'll thank them for that, because I may have been involved in something else...I'll say, "You're right, I haven't been out there for a while," and I'll accept their comment or advice. It's never in terms of a rebuke; it's presented very positively. I think that's one thing with our Session; I have a good relationship with the men. They know I will listen to and accept what they say. Usually, I do what they say, because I agree with it...It's more like we're in this together, and I try to involve them and honor them in front of the congregation. I just appreciate my elders. They give me suggestions. They advise and point out things they think I need to know. They bring comments that they hear to my attention, so that together we can address them. And I do likewise. I like more personal, ongoing feedback, correction, and evaluation. I like hearing about things when they start to go wrong, rather than after they've gone wrong.



Bob has learned that elders can be valuable allies in ministry, for they often see things that pastors do not see and, as laymen, have a perspective that pastors often lack.

### **Further Analysis of the Data**

In further analyzing the data, the researcher noted that all of the respondents commented on the difficulty created by conflicting expectations. In the case of Bob and Duane, it resulted in a congregational vote, in their fifteenth and eleventh years, respectively, to determine if they should continue as pastor. Both were retained and now, ten years later, describe their ministries as more peaceful and productive, as do Aaron and Charles, who have served their churches for thirty-one and twenty-four years, respectively. The researcher found it interesting that, of the eight pastors interviewed, the four who have served their churches for twenty-two or more years said that they felt more effective now than at any other time in their ministry, whereas those who have served their churches for eleven or fewer years described themselves as experiencing varying degrees of restlessness.

### **Summary of Findings**

In this chapter, the participants of the study were introduced and their insights concerning the questions that guided the research were presented and analyzed under common themes. The researcher appreciates the candor with which the participants shared their lives and experiences. It was obvious that each one deeply cares for his congregation and is seeking to faithfully serve it. The next chapter will be devoted to consolidating the research from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the interviews

conducted in Chapter Four by comparing and contrasting the two, after which the researcher will make conclusions and offer recommendations.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success. Four research questions were used to guide the study. The research questions were:

1. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness?
  - a. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of their ministry priorities?
  - b. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of their sense of call?
  - c. How do pastors of small churches describe their ministry effectiveness in light of successful completion of goals?
2. How do pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness?
3. What do pastors of small churches think others expect of their ministry?
  - a. What do pastors of small churches think members expect of their ministry?
  - b. What do pastors of small churches think elders expect of their ministry?
4. How do the expectations of others affect the way pastors of small churches evaluate their ministry effectiveness?

In order to answer these questions, four areas of literature were reviewed in Chapter Two: biblical-theological; Puritan notables and their spiritual descendants, particularly those who pastored small churches; twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors on the character and work of the pastor in general and the challenges of small church ministry in particular; and contemporary writers on leadership effectiveness. Likewise, eight pastors who have served the same small congregation for at least seven years were interviewed. Their insights regarding these questions were reported in Chapter Four. In this chapter, the researcher will summarize and consolidate the findings from the literature reviewed and the interviews conducted by comparing and contrasting the two, after which conclusions will be made and recommendations offered.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Of the four areas of literature reviewed, only two—twentieth- and twenty-first century authors, and contemporary writers on leadership effectiveness—directly answered the questions that guided this research. The other two literature areas, biblical-theological and Puritan notables, were concerned primarily with the character and work of the pastor. The biblical-theological material stressed faithfulness, the importance of a circumspect life, loving God, and feeding the flock, particularly through the preached word. Puritan notables focused on many of the same themes, but added the necessity of depending on grace, being willing to suffer, and the importance of prayer, the sacraments, and catechesis. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors touched on many of these areas as well, though in describing and evaluating ministry effectiveness, they added the necessity of loving the lost and the renewal work of the Lord, and leading the

congregation into the community for the sake of the community. Finally, authors on leadership effectiveness said that leaders must challenge others' expectations of them, discussed how to best do this, and emphasized the need to care for one's soul. Together, these four areas of literature painted a portrait of pastoral effectiveness to which any minister would aspire; though, as the interviews showed, there is often a disparity between the ideal and the actual. The literature described what ought to be; the interviews described what is.

### **Discussion of the Findings and Preliminary Thoughts**

To consolidate the findings and arrive at the conclusions to be made in the next section, the researcher took note of similarities and differences between the research from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the interviews conducted in Chapter Four. No less than seven similarities and four differences were observed.

#### **Similarities**

Both the literature reviewed and the pastors consulted agreed that ministers must depend on God and his grace. As Richard Baxter put it, "Our whole work must be carried on under a deep sense of our own insufficiency, and of our entire dependence on Christ."<sup>254</sup> Gabe acknowledged the same thing when he said, "It's not me and my giftedness that accomplishes the work. It's God's Spirit that has to move." Indeed, it is. God is the true mover of men's hearts, whether the pastor's or the congregation's.

Both the literature and the pastors interviewed also spoke of the priority of preaching. The Apostle Paul said, "[P]reach the word; be ready in season and out of

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<sup>254</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 122.

season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”<sup>255</sup> Thomas Boston concurred: “Our great business is to bring souls to Christ, and to preach his unsearchable riches.”<sup>256</sup> And so did Hal, who could well have been speaking for all the pastors when he said, “I see my primary responsibility as preaching the word. That trumps everything!” Declaring the truth, whether in evangelism or for the purpose of strengthening the saints, is the calling of every minister.

The literature and those interviewed were also of one mind regarding a minister’s love for God and for those who belong to him. Hence Jesus’ thrice-asked question of Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”<sup>257</sup> Or James Stalker’s beautiful admission: “When I first settled in a church, I discovered a thing of which nobody had told me, and which I had not anticipated...I fell in love with my congregation...It was as genuine a blossom of heart as any which I have ever experienced. It made it easy to do anything for my people.”<sup>258</sup> Such love was evident in the way Charles spoke of his members as a family. It was also evident in the way several pastors described their efforts to pursue sinning members and, in some cases, to excommunicate those who would not repent, even though such action was taken at great cost to the pastors themselves and to their relationships with others.

The literature and the respondents also agreed on the need for shepherds to walk with their sheep. As Eugene Peterson said, “[T]he work does not terminate...with the

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<sup>255</sup> 2 Timothy 4:2.

<sup>256</sup> Boston, *The Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, 79.

<sup>257</sup> John 21:15, 16, 17.

<sup>258</sup> Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry*, 114.

pronouncing of the benediction...[P]astoral work accompanies the people where they live out what they have heard and sung and said and believed in worship...[T]hey are not only sent, they are accompanied.”<sup>259</sup> This is precisely what Aaron did when the son of a congregant told him that he had gotten his non-Christian girlfriend pregnant. Aaron came alongside this young couple, spoke truth to them, and helped them with the very difficult decisions they had to make.

Both the literature and the pastors interviewed also agreed that the church must be outward looking; it must give itself to evangelism and to ministries of mercy. In the Puritan age, when most people were churchgoers, evangelism looked very different than it does today. Richard Baxter described it as “bringing unsound professors of the faith to sincerity, that they who before were Christians in name and show, may be so indeed.”<sup>260</sup> Nowadays, unbelievers have very little to do with the church. Few attend, and because of this, few understand or have regard for biblical truth. As Christopher Wright said, such people need to hear and see the good news. “It needs words and deeds. Message and proof.”<sup>261</sup> Reggie McNeal agreed, saying that the church needs to look for ways “to bless and serve the communities where they are located,”<sup>262</sup> for in doing so, God’s heart for the world is revealed. This is why Charles’s church offers classes for recently paroled men and women, and why Ed’s church gives backpacks filled with practical expressions of love to homeless teenagers. Both are preaching the gospel, even if not in so many words.

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<sup>259</sup> Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 19.

<sup>260</sup> Baxter, *Gildas Salvianus: The Reformed Pastor*, 77-78.

<sup>261</sup> Wright, 274.

<sup>262</sup> McNeal, 7.

The literature and the respondents also agreed that measuring effectiveness in ministry is exceedingly difficult. Less than four months before his death, Robert Murray M'Cheyne asked his congregation, "What has been our success?...[T]here are some of you who have fled for refuge to the hope set before you; but most sleep on."<sup>263</sup> Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky asserted that "You cannot measure the good that you do."<sup>264</sup> And Frank expressed the sentiment of all when he said, "[Y]ou never come to the end of the path. There are always more people to see, always more ways to handle the text, always better illustrations to use, always a deeper way of looking at a particular issue, always a more gracious way of dealing with a person." In short, pastoral effectiveness regularly feels just beyond a minister's grasp.

Finally, both the literature and the pastors interviewed spoke of the importance of believing and resting in God's sovereignty. As George Vanderpoel put it, "I believe in God's sovereignty and that I must wait on the Lord. I must faithfully teach the Word until he brings the increase."<sup>265</sup> Frank concurred: "If I didn't have the sovereignty of God to rest in, if I couldn't say, 'Okay, Lord, I'm trusting in you, for you are greater than all of my strengths and all of my weaknesses...' If I didn't have that...I would feel utterly hopeless and pastoral ministry would be sheer futility." Pastors must be faithful and work hard, but effectiveness does not ultimately rest in either. The Maker of heaven and earth is builder of his church as well.

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<sup>263</sup> Bonar, 584.

<sup>264</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, 214.

<sup>265</sup> Shelley: 39.



## Differences

The researcher also took note of four differences between the research from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the interviews conducted in Chapter Four. The first concerns the priority of devotion to Christ and personal holiness. The Apostle Paul considered it integral to a minister's life and work. "[T]rain yourself for godliness,"<sup>266</sup> he said to Timothy, and then added, "Keep a close watch on yourself..."<sup>267</sup> The Puritans and their spiritual descendants agreed. As M'Cheyne put it, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness."<sup>268</sup> So, too, did twenty-first-century authors Derek Prime and Alistair Begg, who said, "The New Testament places as great a stress upon character as a qualification for spiritual leadership as upon gifting."<sup>269</sup> Yet, of the eight pastors interviewed, only Duane and Hal spoke of the importance of nurturing one's own soul and its relationship to ministerial effectiveness. As Duane put it, "My own spiritual life has to be first. If I ignore that, I have nothing to offer others." The researcher does not conclude from this that the other respondents believe that the care of their souls is unimportant; it is interesting, however, that so few said anything about it.

A second difference noted concerns the priority of prayer. Isaac Watts thought it imperative to a minister's effectiveness: "Be very solicitous about the success of your labors... Water the seed sown, not only with public but with secret prayer. Plead with God

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<sup>266</sup> 1 Timothy 4:7.

<sup>267</sup> 1 Timothy 4:16.

<sup>268</sup> Prime and Begg, 35.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 36.

importantly, that He would not suffer you to labor in vain.”<sup>270</sup> Prime and Begg agreed: “Prayer is our principal and main work. It has priority over the ministry of the Word in that it must come first.”<sup>271</sup> And Peterson called prayer “the chief pastoral work.”<sup>272</sup> Yet, again, the researcher found it interesting that only one of the eight pastors interviewed spoke of prayer as it relates to ministerial effectiveness. Why is that? Hal, with a healthy sense of his own inadequacy, said that he prayed at least an hour a day for those in his flock. Do the other pastors feel less need for prayer? One would assume not, though as the interviews revealed, prayer was not foremost on the minds of most.

A third difference concerns the place of suffering in ministry. The imprisonments of John Bunyan and Samuel Rutherford are but two of the many examples from the Puritan era of ministers who endured great affliction for the faith. Thankfully, in most Western nations today such suffering is rare. There is, however, another kind of suffering to which pastors are still called: suffering with one’s flock. Peterson acknowledged it when he said,

Pastoral work joins the sufferer, shares the experience of God’s anger, enters into the pain, the hurt, the sense of absurdity, the descent into the depths... Pastoral work among the suffering wears a path between home and sanctuary—listens to the poured out, individualized grief and brings it into the sanctuary where it becomes part of the common grief, is placed at the foot of the cross and subjected to the powers of salvation.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> *The Christian Pastor's Manual: A Selection of Tracts on the Duties, Difficulties, and Encouragements of the Christian Ministry*, 243.

<sup>271</sup> Prime and Begg, 68.

<sup>272</sup> Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 55.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 135, 145.

Interestingly, none of the respondents described or evaluated ministry effectiveness in terms of sharing in the suffering of their sheep, though surely every pastor interviewed does so. Perhaps this says more about how the respondents measure effectiveness, than it does about how they conceive of their ministerial duties.

Finally, the researcher noted that although the Puritans had much to say about the importance of the sacraments and catechesis, the twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors and those interviewed scarcely mentioned either. And when the respondents did refer to the means of grace, they usually meant preaching and prayer, which at best is a truncated view of Puritan and Reformed belief. As Thomas Watson said, “In the Word preached the saints hear Christ’s voice; in the sacrament (by which he meant the Supper) they have his kiss.” Again, it is hard to know what, if anything, to conclude from this. Surely, the pastors interviewed—everyone of them Reformed—believe in the importance of the sacraments; though when asked to describe and evaluate their effectiveness in ministry, the subject of the sacraments was strangely absent. So, too, was the matter of catechesis, which was so important to the Puritans. The researcher suspects that the reason for this is that much of the catechesis done by pastors in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries is now being done by Sunday School teachers and small group leaders. Nevertheless, its absence from all the interviews was surprising.

### **Conclusions**

This study was done to explore how pastors of small churches evaluate their effectiveness in light of divergent views of success. What the researcher found is quite interesting. When directly asked, the pastors said that they evaluate their effectiveness by

their faithfulness to carry out the work they have been called to do, and by the spiritual health of their members, as evidenced by their relationships to one another and their ministry to the community, regardless of the results. When indirectly asked, however, their answers revealed that, for most, numerical growth was more important to their sense of effectiveness than they first admitted. In fact, of the eight ministers interviewed, all but one spoke of their desire to see their churches grow numerically and that such growth would be an indicator of effectiveness. Only Charles, who pastors the largest of the eight churches, with 160 regular attenders, said nothing about it. What is unknown to this researcher is whether Charles, who is highly relational, failed to mention numerical growth because he pastors a church of 160, or whether he pastors a church of 160 because individuals rather than numerical growth are more important to him. Either way, at least seven conclusions can be drawn from the answers the respondents gave in light of the literature reviewed: pastoring a small church is difficult; God is in charge of outcomes; diligence and faithfulness must be a minister's aim; preaching must be accompanied by prayer; pastoral longevity is an asset to minister and congregation; a reward awaits faithful service; and pastoring a small congregation is a noble calling.

### **Pastoring a Small Church Is Difficult**

Andrew Fuller described pastoral ministry in all churches when he said to those aspiring to the sacred office, "Endure afflictions. If you cannot bear these, you had better let the ministry alone."<sup>274</sup> Anyone who has served Christ's church can attest to the truth of this statement, but particularly those who serve small congregations, for solo pastors

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<sup>274</sup> Fuller, 1:519.

carry a formidable load. They preach at least forty-eight times a year, plan and lead worship each week, do most if not all the counseling and visitation, teach Sunday School and/or Bible studies, moderate Session meetings, and are generally expected to respond to whatever other expectations the Session or congregation has of them. For Hal that includes setting up the Advent decorations and spreading salt on the sidewalk in the winter. The responsibilities vary from pastor to pastor but, if the ministers interviewed are representative of those who serve small congregations, the story is the same: pastors of small churches work hard, usually under a plethora of expectations, and are often disappointed by the results.

### **God Is in Charge of Outcomes**

Not least among the expectations pastors feel is the expectation that their church grow numerically. This is not surprising; every pastor expects to see such growth, and, all things being equal, it is a reasonable expectation. A congregation should grow spiritually and numerically. Most congregations expect to see such growth as well. That is one of the reasons churches engage in outreach and in ministries of mercy. But, as David Roper said, “The direction a church goes, the speed with which it develops, and the size to which it grows are [God’s] prerogatives.”<sup>275</sup> He is in charge of outcomes, which means sometimes God may use a minister, as in Ed’s case perhaps, to grow the kingdom rather than his own congregation. Or God may call some, like Hal, who ministers in a very small community where nearly everyone attends church, or Bob, who pastors in the

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<sup>275</sup> Roper, 135.

Pacific Northwest where most people are disinterested in the gospel, to faithfully labor even though they do not see much growth.

### **Diligence and Faithfulness Must Be a Minister's Aim**

Either way, diligence and faithfulness are necessary. “[I]t is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy,”<sup>276</sup> the Apostle Paul said. Or, as Gordon Fee put it, “What is sought in ‘stewards’ is faithfulness...Not eloquence, nor wisdom (nor ‘initiative,’ nor ‘success’...), but faithfulness to the trust.”<sup>277</sup> “Let us follow our work faithfully,” Thomas Boston said, “over the belly of all discouragement and opposition which we may meet with in it.”<sup>278</sup> And, as Roper reminded, that includes “a dogged refusal to fold in the face of criticism, boredom, or difficulty.”<sup>279</sup> Such desire and commitment were expressed by all those interviewed, though clearly some were discouraged and weary of well-doing.

### **Preaching Must Be Accompanied By Prayer**

As mentioned earlier, all of the pastors spoke of the importance of sound, biblical preaching, though only Hal commented on the indispensable nature of prayer to the ministry of the word. Richard Baxter said, “Prayer must carry on our work as well as preaching; he preacheth not heartily to his people, that prayeth not earnestly for them.”<sup>280</sup> The two, in other words, are inseparable. And how could they be otherwise, since, as Prime and Begg said, “It is by prayer that the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is

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<sup>276</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:2.

<sup>277</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 160.

<sup>278</sup> Boston, *The Complete Works of the Late Rev. Thomas Boston, Ettrick: Including His Memoirs, Written by Himself*, 162.

<sup>279</sup> Roper, 136.

<sup>280</sup> Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 122.

effectively unsheathed.”<sup>281</sup> It is crucial that pastors believe this, especially pastors of small churches, who may be tempted to trust in their relationships with members rather than in God’s power to perfect the saints. And, as Hal noted, perfecting the saints is only one of the reasons pastors preach. The catechism also teaches that pastors are to be about gathering the saints. A minister, in other words, must also preach for conversion, whether of the covenant child sitting at his mother’s side, or of the unchurched visitor who was invited to the Sunday service. In either case, the sermon must be understandable to both, and therefore must be conceived by a pastor who has both in view. Hence all the more reason for prayer, for surely it takes God to empower such sermon-craft, and God to use the same to accomplish his kingdom purposes.

### **Pastoral Longevity Is an Asset to Minister and Congregation**

This researcher found it significant that the four pastors who have served their churches twenty-two or more years expressed greater contentment and satisfaction in ministry than the four pastors who have served their churches eleven or fewer years. They also described more peaceful churches, though it had not always been so. In fact, each of them spoke of difficult seasons in their ministries, through which God shaped them and melded their hearts with the hearts of their congregation. This was in striking contrast to the two pastors who have served their churches the fewest number of years, both of whom are currently in difficult seasons with their congregations. While such a conclusion must be tentative, as only eight pastors were interviewed, it seems to this researcher that pastoral longevity is an advantage to both minister and congregation, for it affords each

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<sup>281</sup> Prime and Begg, 68.

the opportunity to grow in ways they might not otherwise do, were the pastor to leave.

Granted, it is not always possible to stay, nor is it always God's will; but when the Lord permits, it can result in great blessing to all.

### **A Reward Awaits Faithful Service**

In Jesus' parable of the faithful and wise slave, he said, "Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions."<sup>282</sup> Such is the promise to which every faithful Christian must cling, but especially pastors of small churches, who often labor for years without seeing the results they pray for. It is imperative that pastors of small churches know and remember that the accounting that truly matters is not done on Sunday mornings when noses are counted; it is done when the Lord returns. Then, as Lesslie Newbigin said, "All who have committed their work in faithfulness to God will be by Him raised up to share in the new age, and will find that their labor was not lost, but that it has found its place in the completed kingdom."<sup>283</sup> There is a reward that awaits those who faithfully tend the sheep God has entrusted to their care.

### **Pastoring a Small Congregation Is a Noble Calling**

Finally, pastors of small churches must understand that God has given them a glorious trust; he has called them to shepherd his bride. Whether she be "thirty-seven" in number or "thirty-seven hundred,"<sup>284</sup> as Eugene Peterson said, it matters not. A small church is just as precious to the Lord Jesus; he shed his own blood for her. And the work

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<sup>282</sup> Matthew 24:46-47.

<sup>283</sup> Newbigin, 47.

<sup>284</sup> Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, 212.



he has called small church pastors to is the same: praying, preaching, administering the sacraments, loving the saints and the lost. The work of pastoring a small church is a noble calling, for it has been ennobled by the Lord himself. He said to Peter, “Feed my lambs... Tend my sheep... Feed my sheep.”<sup>285</sup> That is the work of a small church pastor, and it is glorious work. As Richard Heyricke said, “Heaven itself cannot show forth a more excellent creature than a faithful preacher... Yea, heaven itself is not more glorious than a small village having a Peter, a Paul, to preach in it.”<sup>286</sup>

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Having given considerable thought to the answers the participants gave and to the stories they told, it is this researcher’s recommendation that pastors of small churches find other pastors of small churches with whom to regularly meet and pray. The reasons for doing so are obvious. Small church pastors are solo pastors, which means they experience a degree of isolation that is unique to their calling; they have no other minister with whom to share the burdens and responsibilities of ministry. As a result, they are left to their own thoughts regarding the difficulties and discouragements they face. They lack the wisdom of many counselors.

Because of this isolation, small church pastors are also vulnerable to temptation and sin. It is easy, for example, for solo pastors to either waste time or be workaholics. They have no supervisors to oversee their productivity or monitor their schedules. The accountability that is characteristic of most jobs is absent from the small church. And

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<sup>285</sup> John 21:15, 16, 17.

<sup>286</sup> Richardson, 71.

even when elders want to come alongside their pastors to help them and to hold them accountable, it is difficult, for few elders have the time.

Or take a pastor's marriage. There is no more important relationship than that. A minister's credibility and moral authority are dependent on a healthy marriage. That is why ministry marriages are so often under attack, and why pastors must protect and nurture their relationships with their spouses.

For all these reasons, it seems prudent for small church pastors to seek out colleagues with whom to share their hearts, bear one another's burdens, and care for each other's souls.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Having come to the end of this study, the researcher can easily envision several other studies that might prove helpful to Christ's church. First, as noted earlier, only one of the eight participants spoke of prayer and two of the eight spoke of devotion to Christ and personal holiness as being important to ministerial effectiveness. It would be interesting to learn more about the devotional lives and practices of pastors of small churches and, particularly, how those practices help them face the challenges that attend such ministry.

Second, while none of the pastors interviewed commented on the importance of the sacraments to their ministerial effectiveness, it is assumed that as Reformed ministers they believe them to be so. It would be interesting to learn how such belief shapes the practices and informs the expectations of such pastors, as well as how they have seen God use the sacraments to strengthen and mature those under their care.

Third, despite its lack of mention by the participants, it is also assumed that Reformed ministers believe catechesis is important to the spiritual growth and health of their congregations. It would be interesting to discover how pastors of small churches use or encourage the use of Reformed confessions and catechism, and how their use has benefited both children and adults.

Fourth, as the study revealed, pastors are called to suffer with their sheep and to accompany them in the way. While none of the participants commented on this aspect of pastoral ministry, it would be interesting to learn how pastors of small churches do this, and how they fit it into their busy schedules.

Fifth, as the study showed, the call of every minister is to lead the congregation into the community for the sake of the community. It would be interesting to learn more about how pastors of small churches do this, and what effect it has on their congregations and the communities in which they serve.

Sixth, there was no attempt in this study to discover the participants' personality types or to assess whether certain personalities are better suited to long pastorates in small churches. Such a study would be interesting and potentially helpful to those considering where they might best serve the church.

Seventh, though unintentional, in this study's participant pool, there was an eleven-year gap between the four pastors who have served their churches from seven to eleven years, and the four pastors who have served their churches from twenty-two to thirty-one years. The researcher concluded that the pastors with the longer tenure were more content and experienced greater satisfaction in their ministries. It would be

interesting to learn when pastors of small churches begin to feel this contentment and satisfaction and whether it is related to specific events or is more a right-of-passage for those who have stayed a certain number of years.

Eighth, it would be interesting to learn what those who have served long pastorates in small churches found helpful in their seminary training in preparing them for small church ministry. Such information, it seems to this researcher, might prove valuable to both seminary and seminarian.

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