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# EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF  
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

AUTUMN 2023

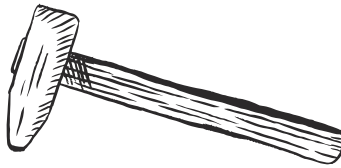
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# THE GREAT CRISIS IN THE CHURCH

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



**W**hen I travel to preach, people approach me and explain how they have to drive a great distance to find a church with expository preaching. They share that they pack up their family each Sunday and pass large numbers of churches until they finally arrive at one where Scripture is expository.

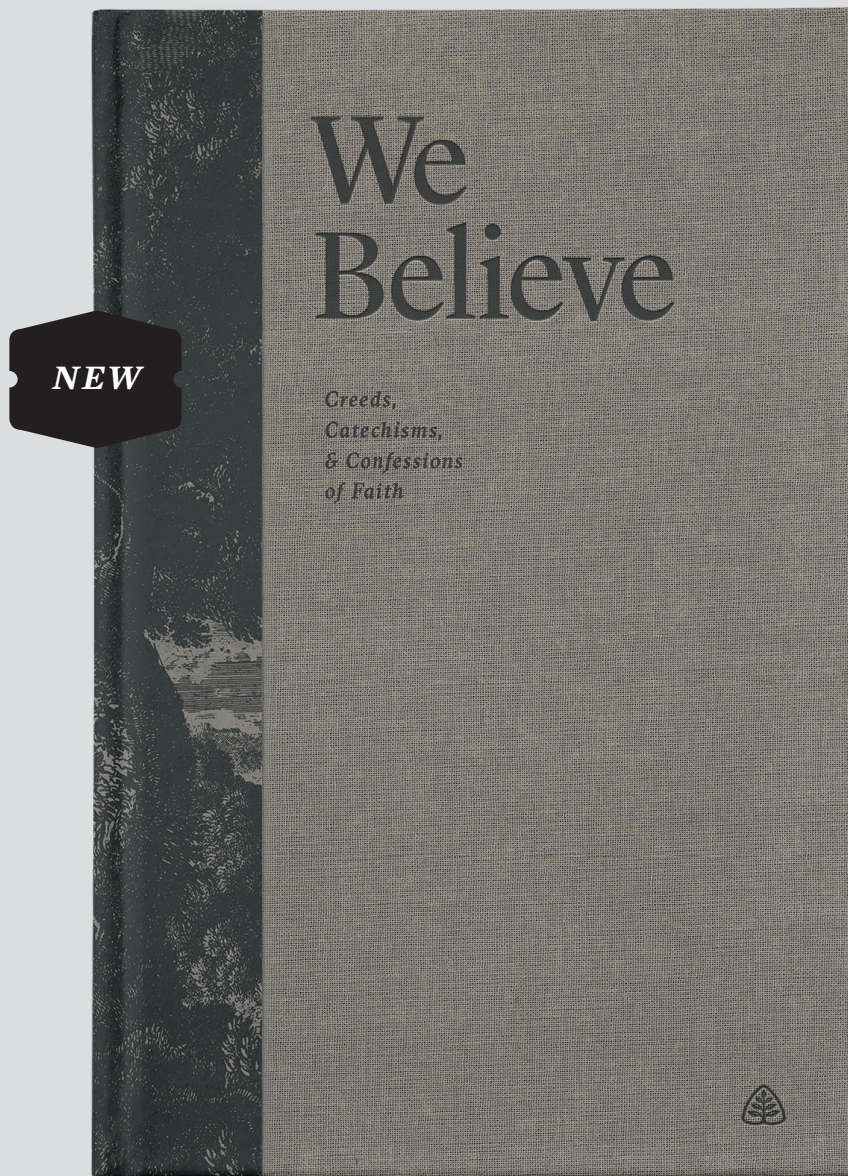
Further, people reach out to OnePassion concerning the town where they live. They want to know where they can find expository preaching. Perhaps a family moves to a new location but cannot find an expositional church near them.

This underscores a great crisis we presently face in the church. There is a dire shortage of expositors in pulpits around the globe. There are many reasons for this, as will be discussed in my article this issue.

Wherever you find an expositor, encourage him. Support him. Pray for him. Affirm him. He will be facing many challenges. Many demands are placed upon him. He will have dissenting voices who oppose him. He is certainly not perfect. But he needs your encouragement.

In this issue, we will address the dearth of expository preaching in churches. Many of you will be able to relate to this issue. May God raise up a new generation of expositors that will fill the void to proclaim His Word, for His glory. ♦

*Steven J. Lawson*



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### EXPOSITOR



AUTUMN 2023 ISSUE 44 © 2023 ONEPASSION MINISTRIES, DALLAS, TEXAS 75382 WEBSITE: ONEPASSION.ORG  
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# WHY ARE THERE SO FEW EXPOSITORS?

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STEVEN J. LAWSON

**N**ot all preachers are expositors. In fact, only a small percentage of pastors are committed to biblical exposition. Such men are few and far between. As a result, many people have to drive a significant distance just to find and sit under such preaching. A state of emergency needs to be declared for the contemporary pulpit.

The prophet Amos foretold such a time in his day, “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord GOD, ‘when I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the LORD’” (Amos 8:11). This shortage of hearing the Word of God is surely here today. As with ancient Israel, we presently live under severe

famine conditions that have left the church weak and its members anemic.

In this modern-day famine, pulpits have dried up altogether. Rather than serving the meat of the Word, junk food is often offered. Even the milk of the Word is being withheld. Believers are starving as they are fed a steady diet of worldly wisdom. Souls are emaciated. Spirits are bloated. Strength is wasting away from the lack of a steady diet in biblical truth.

This raises the question: why are so few men expositors? A survey of the contemporary church reveals multiple contributing factors as to why there are so few Bible preachers today. It is by no coincidence that most modern congregations find

themselves malnourished. The primary causes can be summarized as follows and deserve our consideration.

### **WHY THE FAMINE?**

There are many reasons why there are so few expositors today. Each of these explanations contributes to this demise, while some play a more significant role than others. In many churches, several of these factors converge and cause the tragic dearth of expository preaching.

#### ***A Lack of Proper Training***

Many men stand in pulpits today without having received the proper training or adequate education to be a biblical expositor. Some attended Bible colleges and seminaries that failed to sufficiently train them for this important task. Others never attended an institution of higher learning in theological study. Consequently, many were never taught how to be a Bible preacher. Often, their training is the product of a shallow or faulty denominational school. Still others never received biblical equipping or discipling in this all-important pursuit.

The result of this void is that many of these men are ill prepared to do what God requires them to do—namely, preach the Word. They have been taught more about planning church programs than they have about rightly handling the Word. In many cases, they will have to forget what they have learned before they can be properly taught in being an effective expositor. The blame lies at the feet of many seminaries who graduate ill-prepared men.

#### ***A Lack of Proper Role Models***

Other preachers are not expositors because they have been poorly influenced in their pulpit ministries by the wrong role models. They are, tragically, emulating other pastors in their denomination or associations who are not expositors. As like produces like, so mediocre examples produce and perpetuate mediocrity. The unfortunate influence of foolish mentors only prolongs the famine in the church from one generation to the next, as it obfuscates the delivery of the biblical truth.

The influence of one preacher upon another

can work in one of two opposite directions. Solomon writes, “[As] iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Prov 27:17). This is the timeless principle of discipleship, where one person exerts a positive impact upon another person. So it is among ministers. But this reality can also work in the other direction. A poor example in the pulpit casts a negative influence upon other easily influenced ministers.

#### ***A Desire for Larger Numbers***

Still other men are not expositors because they crave large crowds. They water down the message in order to make it palatable to more people. Sometimes, this is done subconsciously. But all too often, it is done intentionally. These preachers believe they can attract larger numbers to church if they will lighten the message. In doing so, they abandon proclaiming the full counsel of God in Scripture. James S. Stewart remarked decades ago: “The disease of modern preaching is its search after popularity.” Thus, these glib communicators attempt to fill the building, but they never fill the pulpit.

Pragmatism in the pulpit is the enemy of expositional preaching. Those who preach whatever draws a larger crowd will not choose what converts lost souls or deepens believers in their faith. They fail to calculate the maxim that whatever attracts them will be what will keep them. If entertainment draws the multitudes, then it will require even more entertainment to keep them. The sad reality is, once this kind of a gathering is assembled, a sudden shift to biblical exposition would only empty the building.

#### ***A Lack of Proper Discipline***

Yet other pastors are not expositors because they find it too difficult to sit at a desk for any length of time to study and prepare an expository sermon. Such restless men seem incapable of disciplining themselves to dig into the Bible for any length of time. They have an aversion to reading the Scripture, commentaries, and the original languages. They recoil from analyzing its truths and writing the sermon. They are too easily distracted with other activities. Consequently, they take the path of least resistance and bypass this time-consuming,



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# Many pastors acknowledge their belief in the Bible, but sadly, assume the power of God in ministry lies somewhere else.

labor-demanding commitment that requires their mental effort. Instead, they throw together Saturday night specials at the last minute before they stand to preach on Sunday morning.

These pastors fall subject to the tyranny of the urgent. Whatever emergency occurs with the members of their congregation steals them away from their study in preparation to preach. These demands seem to always be a hindrance to proper sermon preparation. In such cases, the good becomes the enemy of the best. These pressing needs become the master over the life of the pastor, preventing him from pursuing the greater good.

### ***A Lack of Confidence in Scripture***

Many pastors acknowledge their belief in the Bible, but sadly, assume the power of God in ministry lies somewhere else. They place greater confidence in their innovative methods and latest programs than in the supernatural power of preaching the divinely inspired Scripture. They rely upon engaging personalities and motivational stories to make the

difference in people's lives rather than the explosive power of the Word of God. They believe that their stage presence and contemporary music will carry the day rather than the proclamation of Scripture.

It is hard not to assume that their confidence in ministry rests in themselves, not in the Bible. They believe in the divine inspiration and verbal, plenary inerrancy of the Scripture, but not its sufficiency. They affirm the infallibility and authority of the Word, but not its capability to do the work. Their spoken creed may be *sola Scriptura*, but their lived creed is *Scriptura et*—Scripture and.

### ***A Neglect of Biblical Examples***

Countless preachers fail to see how true preaching is practiced in the Bible. They lack an awareness of the preaching of the prophets, Jesus Christ, the apostles, and their co-laborers. Their preaching barely resembles what is recorded in pages of Scripture. The preachers of the Old Testament are relegated to a bygone era. To preach with the meticulous precision of “Thus says the Lord” is thought to make one

outdated.

Likewise, too many preachers show no regard for the preaching of Jesus Christ. They dismiss the preaching of the apostles in the Book of Acts. The fire and fervor of these men of old leaves no influence upon their pulpit ministry. They have no regard for the calls for repentance and doctrinal precision of these earlier messengers found in pages of Scripture.

### *A Neglect of Church History*

Many preachers preach as though the church began twenty or thirty years ago, instead of two thousand years. In their quest to be contemporary and relevant, they have never been exposed to the pulpit giants of past centuries. They have never read about the lives and ministries of luminaries who have gone before them. They have never become acquainted with the sermons used by God to ignite reformations and revival in centuries past.


The magisterial Reformers are unknown figures to today's life coaches. Martin Luther and John Calvin

are deemed irrelevant relics of the past, buried beneath the debris of ancient history. The leading Puritans, such as John Owen and John Bunyan, are merely eroding names on the tombstones of old graveyards. The powerful figures of the Great Awakening, like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, are distant strangers. The best in the Victorian Age, such as Charles Spurgeon and J. C. Ryle, are forgotten mentors to most. The same can be said for the expositors Martyn Lloyd-Jones and James Montgomery Boice.

### *A Need for Bold Confidence*

Many preachers today yield to the mounting pressure exerted upon them by their congregation to be shaped to meet their expectations. All too often, it is their own people who place heavy demands upon them, preventing them from spending the time needed to study and exposit the Scripture.

Consequently, many pastors yield to undue influence for the sake of peace—and a salary. They cater to the demands of their people rather than



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modeling priorities established in Scripture. They fear a lack of support by their church if they do not meet coercions. This is the opposite of the practice of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who, drawing upon his previous medical practice, said, “I never let the patient write the prescription.” Nevertheless, many preachers fear a lack of financial giving to the church or loss of attendance if they fail to people-please.

### ***An Inverted Philosophy of Ministry***

Moreover, other preachers presume that the worship service is principally designed for something other than worshipping God. They fail to see that the New Testament pattern for the church on the Lord’s Day is to gather for worship and scatter to witness. They do not see that the principal reason for the Sunday meeting of the church is to be, first and foremost, horizontal toward God, not vertical toward man. They view the worship service as primarily evangelistic, not exaltational.

Therefore, these pastors are more concerned for the “seeker” than the Sovereign, who seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:24). They fail to see themselves as the primary worship leader, pointing believers upward to behold the greatness of God. They measure success by how many people attend church, not how many adore God. Their goal is to fill the building, but they never fill the pulpit.

### ***A Lack of Divine Calling***

For yet others, the reason they are not expositors is because they were never called by God to preach the Word. They do not preach the Word because they are not spiritually gifted to do so. They were not divinely entrusted with the abilities to fulfill this sacred task. The ministry is a career for them, but not a calling. Charles Spurgeon once commented that if God wants a man to fly, He will give him wings—and if He wants him to preach, He will give him the gifts necessary to accomplish the task. But there are too many men today who may run where God has not called them.

Sadly, such ministers have misinterpreted God’s will for their lives. They therefore lack the passion needed to perform this demanding task, week in and

week out, with vigor and zeal. The pulpit becomes a monotonous drudgery for them, not a delight. It is something they endure rather than anticipate with excitement. An eager desire to study is foreign to their pastoral experience. It is a discipline they were never meant to fulfill. Consequently, the pulpit is never their primary domain.

### ***A Lack of Saving Grace***

Yet other pastors, tragically, are unconverted men who have never been born again. They are like the Pharisees of ancient Israel, blind leaders of the blind. Unregenerate ministers will not be expositors, because they have no appetite for the Scripture. The truth of the gospel has not pierced and penetrated into their own soul. Their heart remains distant from the essential message of the Word of God. Because the Bible is not within them personally and experientially, it does not flow from them.

Consequently, they speak of God whom they do not know. They are devoid of the Holy Spirit. It is no wonder that they do not preach the Bible, because they have never acted upon what the Bible says about the gospel. They may be respectable, but they are not regenerated. They may be likable, but they have no life within them. Therefore, they avoid the Bible at all costs.

## **WHAT ARE THE PODS?**

Whenever there is a famine in the land, the people are forced to eat the pods that are left over from previous harvests. There is no nutritional value with the pods, which comprise a dry outer covering. They cannot strengthen or sustain life, but only prolong the coming of death. These husks may fill the stomach, but they can never save the life.

What are some of the approaches in the pulpit that fall short of the divinely established mark of expository preaching?

### ***The Seeker Sensitive***

In this approach to the pulpit, the preacher begins with a felt need, usually a superficial one. He then works backward to find verses that can be a launching point to address that need. But this man will not preach the full counsel of God, nor the hard sayings



of Christ. He exhibits no depth in handling the Scripture. His sermons are typically horizontal and rarely vertical in focus; predominantly man-centered, not God-centered; temporal in gaze, but rarely eternal.

The message is usually more concerned with how to overcome superficial needs such as loneliness, insecurity, or connecting with one's kids rather than how to be right with God and pursue personal holiness. This preacher loses sight of the fact that the church gathers for worship and scatters to witness. He typically sees church as a Sunday morning gathering place for unconverted "seekers" and forgets that the great Seeker is God, who seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

One prominent pastor-guru has said:

Guys that preach verse-by-verse through books of the Bible—that is just cheating. It's cheating because that would be easy, first of all. That isn't how you grow people. No one in the Scripture modeled that. There's not one example of that. All Scripture is equally inspired, but not all Scripture is equally applicable or relevant to every stage of life. My challenge is to read culture and to read an audience and ask: What is the felt need?

Yet another prominent pastor espouses the same philosophy when he writes: "When Jesus

encountered a person He would begin with their hurts, needs, and interests. This is how Jesus began with Nicodemus, right?"

This noted figure continues, "It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart. That key to each person's heart is unique, so it is sometimes difficult to discover. It may take some time to identify it. But the most likely place to start is with the person's felt needs." He further states, "Explosive growth occurs when the type of people in the community match the type of people that are already in the church, and they both match the type of person the pastor is."

This is a dead-end street to nowhere that leaves congregations malnourished.

### *The Motivational Speaker*

Here, preaching is more of a religious pep talk, devotional chat, or shallow monologue. This is the approach to the pulpit in which the "preacher" is full of inspiring stories of human achievement. His message operates on the level of witty slogans and practical advice. It is full of positive thinking, such as "If you can dream it, you can achieve it."

All content in this type of sermon is positive and upbeat, without any mention of sin. It is devoid of any call for repentance. It is silent on any warning

about hell, or fear of God. The teaching is church-lite, intended to make everyone feel comfortable.

A reporter for the *New York Times* visited one mega-church in the desert southwest and found that the messages focused upon “successful principles for living—how to discipline your children, how to reach your professional goals, how to invest your money, how to reduce your debt.” The pastor “never talks about transforming your life through struggle, surrender, or sacrifice; he talks about being happier by accepting Jesus.

When the pastor was interviewed about this light approach, he responded: “If Oprah and Dr. Phil are doing it, why shouldn’t we? We should be better at it because we have the power of God to offer.”

### ***The Devotional Talker***

In this method, the preacher is a feel-good speaker. He brings out practical principles from the passage but never addresses the theology taught in it. He shows life lessons of positive success stories, but he never urges his listeners to make a decisive commitment to follow Christ. He gives general insights into the passage but never issues imperatives from it. He is inspiring without pleading with his people.

### ***The Culture Commentator***

Here the preacher is a culture warrior. This approach to preaching involves a steady, regular diet of addressing an issue in the culture and working back to find a text to confront it. The main emphasis is upon redeeming the culture, not redeeming the sinner.

This may take any number of forms. Some become political preachers and preach on America and our Christian heritage, the founding fathers, and recovering our national values. Others are known for preaching primarily on social issues such as economic justice, overcoming poverty, and social justice. Still others are known for imposing a Christian worldview upon an unregenerate world. The focus here is to bring the arts, education, politics, literature, medicine, and sports under a Christian worldview.

Alistair Begg says: “When pastors become convinced that the central issue facing the church is political or psychological rather than theological,

exposition will be forsaken in favor of political speeches and calls to wage war for the ‘soul of the nation.’”

Martyn Lloyd-Jones once remarked in a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 1:5:

The thing that makes the Christian message a gospel is that it is a proclamation of the good news. It is not just topical comments on the latest scandal in the newspapers or the latest bit of news. It is not that we spend our time in telling kings and princes and presidents and prime ministers how they ought to be running their countries and how they ought to be solving the international problem.

### ***The Psychological Counselor***

Here the preacher is a counselor steeped in pop psychology. As he stands in the pulpit, he reflects the massive inroads that psychology has made into our spiritual vocabulary. This kind of preaching gives a secular diagnosis of spiritual problems and then offers a worldly solution. It presumes the Bible as insufficient to deal with those personal problems.

Consequently, this approach to preaching says man suffers from disorders, not disobedience. He needs therapy, not theology. He has a social problem, not a sin problem. It sets forth psychiatric analysis, using the terms of the psychiatrist rather than those of biblical truth. It speaks of repressions and fixations, traumas and neuroses, syndromes and disorders, and complexes. It draws from the behavior sciences more than the richness of Scripture.

This follows the pattern of Harry Emerson Fosdick, the father of modern positive thinking in the pulpit, who remarked: “Preaching is personal counseling on a group basis.” This approach to the pulpit has redefined spiritual problems in nonbiblical, secular categories. Alistair Begg refers to this as “airline preaching,” as it resembles a surface-level article featured in an airline’s magazine.

### ***The Engaging Storyteller***

Here the preacher is simply a storyteller, in which he “tells” a simple story designed to teach a moral lesson. Often, it is a personal tale of the preacher’s own trials and how he triumphed over them.

David Wells writes, “Across much of evangelicalism, but especially in the market-driven churches, one therefore sees a new kind of leadership among pastors now. Gone is the older model of the scholar-saint, one who was as comfortable with books and learning as with the aches of the soul. This was the shepherd who knew the flock, knew how to tend it, and Sunday by Sunday took that flock into the treasures of God’s Word.”

Instead, Wells notes, “This has changed . . . . He is completely results-oriented, pragmatic, happy to employ any technique from the secular world that will produce the desired results.”

With too many preachers, the dominant thrust will be how another individual overcame a life challenge. This kind of preaching is short on propositional truth and theological substance, but long on emotional content.

These preachers are, in reality, not preachers, but storytellers. Al Mohler writes concerning this approach to preaching: “Many evangelicals are seduced by the proponents of narrative preaching. The declarative force of Scripture is blunted by a demand for story.”

Alistair Begg says, “The fact that [Jesus’] parables were ‘earthly stories with heavenly meaning’ does not grant the contemporary preacher the license to tell stories devoid of heavenly meaning that are of no earthly use!”

### ***The Scripture Abandoner***

Under this guise of preaching, a biblical text is read as a launching point, but the preacher hardly addresses the passage, if at all. The purpose of the text is only to serve as the front porch to the house, that is, to provide an entrance into the message, but has little if anything to do with the substance of the passage itself.

The text serves only as a general orientation to the subject to be addressed. The text read at the beginning of the sermon is like the singing of the national anthem at the start of a football game.

It is something heard once initially but is never heard again throughout the message. The reading of a text serves like a springboard, simply to get the message up and going in a certain direction.

Though the message starts with a text, it sadly never stays with it. The result is often “finding” something in the text that is not there because the text is only a pretext.

Alistair Begg comments on this when he says,

When we hear the congregation declaring, “Wasn’t it amazing what he got out of that?” we should not immediately assume that the news is good. When the preacher refuses to do the hard work of discovering the actual meaning of the text in its context, and when he divorces discovery and application, just about anything can be conveyed—and often is!

### ***The Altar-Call Preacher***

Here the success of the sermon is determined by the number of people that walk forward at the end. Often composed with good intentions, the sermon is designed to urge people to respond to an invitation to step out into the aisle and come to the front.

The sermon’s sole purpose is to prime the pump for people to answer the invitation. The decision called for by the preacher may be to be saved, be baptized, join the church, rededicate one’s life, answer the call to ministry, go to the mission field, or to speak with a counselor.

Trained counselors will often step out into the aisle to help others overcome their apprehension about making a public decision. The interpretation or application of the passage is often understood to be what will be most likely to move someone to respond to the invitation by walking forward.

The result is that the sermon is designed to sway people to come forward during an invitation hymn or chorus. Consequently, the message often is brief, with a lengthy invitation.

### ***The Hell-Fire Ranter***

This form of preaching is best summarized by the preacher who “picks a text and picks a fit.” This sermon is long on judgment, but short on salvation; long on law, but short on grace.

Here, the preacher raises his voice to a shouting level, pounding the pulpit, stomping around on the platform, and once the gestures are added, “looks

like a man fighting bees.”

While passion in the pulpit is an absolute necessity for any effective preacher, this style of preaching brings more heat than light. Consequently, the sermon has little, if any, exposition and theology. This is the approach of one such preacher who wrote in the margin of his notes: “Weak point, yell here.” Even one week of this kind of preaching leaves one weak.

### *The Data-Dumper*


Here, the preacher is merely a lecturer, disseminating information about the Bible without making an appeal to the listener to live its truth. The sermon (or “talk”) is long on historical background, word studies, and the parsing of verbs but short on application or exhortation. It is all indicatives, but no imperatives—all doctrine, but no duty. Such preaching is, in reality, teaching—but not preaching.

Lecturing is not preaching. All preaching must include teaching, but it must rise higher and go farther than teaching. This kind of preaching, with its

purely didactic delivery, is cold and clinical. It lacks passion. It has no exhortation. There is no challenge that makes a demand upon the listener. There is no appeal to the will. There is no summons that presses for a response.

Expository preaching should not be a “data dump” of disconnected observations without a central theme and compelling appeal. It is not a barrage of rambling comments without logical order and sequential thought. Neither is it a digest of exegetical findings that lacks compelling interest and powerful persuasion. Nor is it a string of word studies and cross references without a structure of thought and powerful motivation. It is not a sequence of independent headings without a unifying theme and final summation.

Iain Murray writes: “It is not enough that its content be biblical; addresses which concentrated upon word-studies, or which gave running commentary and analyses of whole chapters, might be termed ‘biblical,’ but that is not the same as exposition.” Instead, Murray insists, “To expound is not simply



**While passion in the pulpit is an absolute necessity for any effective preacher, this style of preaching brings more heat than light.**

to give the correct grammatical sense of a verse or passage. The expository preacher is not one who ‘shares his studies’ with others.” Instead, he must be “logic on fire.”

Merill Unger writes of this abuse of the pulpit: “There is a difference between preaching and teaching. Teaching may be about the Bible or may deal with the content of the Bible itself.” To the contrary, “true preaching, although it involves teaching, goes beyond it, enforcing with unction and power the claims of the Word of God upon the needs of the hearers.”

Unger writes, “Much of current pulpit ministry consists in lecturing or discoursing about the Bible, rather than in preaching. But lecturing and pure teaching properly belong to the classroom, not the pulpit. Preaching is the glory of the pulpit, and when men behind the sacred desk abandon preaching for lecturing or pure teaching, the glory fades.”


## CONCLUSION

Each of these misguided approaches to the pulpit

contributes to the malnutrition from which the church suffers. Each is a dramatic departure from what constitutes true expository preaching. It lacks the necessary elements of an authentic exposition of a passage that is delivered with the passion of preaching.

This downward spiral must be reversed if the church is to be strong. Those who stand in pulpits must preach the Word with renewed precision and power. Shallow devotional talks must be replaced with meaty expositions of the full counsel of God. No longer should congregations be fed from the children’s menu. Instead, they must be served a full course meal, as though they are sitting at a king’s banquet table.

Given that few expositors presently exist, each man must redouble his efforts to faithfully expound the Word. In the meantime, let us pray that a new army of men can be raised up by God to meet the needs of the church in this hour of severe famine. ♦



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# THE HIGHEST CALLING

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JOHN MACARTHUR

**S**everal years ago I had the opportunity to preach at the Southern Baptist Pastors Conference in New Orleans. It was quite an opportunity to stand on the 50-yard line of the Louisiana Superdome, where the New Orleans Saints usually play football, and preach to 25,000 pastors and their wives, seated on three tiers of grandstands. It was a wonderful time to speak and to call them to accountability as those who serve the Lord Jesus Christ by leading His church.

During that meeting, I shared with them a perspective on the ministry that I found stunning; it is a word to one who would be a pastor:

Fling him into his office. Tear the office sign from

the door. Nail on the sign, "Study." Take him off the mailing list. Lock him up with his books and his typewriter and his Bible. Slam him down on his knees before texts and broken hearts, and the flippant lives of a superficial flock and before a holy God. Force him to be the one man in our surfeited communities who knows about God. Throw him into the ring to box with God until he learns how short his arms are. Engage him to wrestle with God all the night through, and let him come out only when he's bruised and beaten into being a blessing.

Shut his mouth forever spouting remarks, and stop his tongue forever tripping lightly over every nonessential. Require him to have something to

say before he dares break the silence, and bend his knees in the lonesome valley. Burn his eyes with weary study. Wreck his emotional poise with worry for God. And make him exchange his pious stance for a humble walk with God and man. Make him spend and be spent for the glory of God. Rip out his telephone. Burn up his ecclesiastical success sheets. Put water in his gas tank. Give him a Bible and tie him to the pulpit and make him preach the Word of the living God.

Test him. Quiz him. Examine him. Humiliate him for his ignorance of things divine. Shame him for his good comprehension of finances, batting averages, and political in-fighting. Laugh at his frustrated effort to play psychiatrist. Form a choir and raise a chant and haunt him with it night and day, “Sir, we would see Jesus.”

When at long last he dares assay the pulpit, ask him if he has a word from God. If he does not, then dismiss him. Tell him you can read the morning paper and digest the television commentaries, and think through the day’s superficial problems, and manage the community’s weary drives, and bless the sordid baked potatoes and green beans better than he can.

Command him not to come back until he’s read and reread, written and rewritten, until he can stand up, worn and forlorn, and say, “Thus saith the Lord.”

Break him across the board of his ill-gotten popularity. Smack him hard with his own prestige. Corner him with questions about God. Cover him with demands for celestial wisdom, and give him no escape until he is backed against the wall of the word. And sit down before him and listen to the only word he has left, God’s word. Let him be totally ignorant of the down-street gossip, but give him a chapter and order him to walk around it, camp on it, sup with it, and come at last to speak it backward and forward, until all he says about it rings with the truth of eternity.

And when he’s burned out by the flaming word, when he’s consumed at last by the fiery grace blazing through him, and when he’s privileged to translate the truth of God to man, and finally

transferred from earth to heaven, then bear him away gently and blow a muted trumpet and lay him down softly. Place a two-edged sword on his coffin and raise the tomb triumphant. For he was a brave soldier of the word, and ere he died, he had become a man of God.

That calls us to a fairly formidable task, doesn’t it? The calling to which God has called men as shepherds of His flock is a serious one.

And I would like to draw your attention to one verse in 1 Timothy 3, just to note the seriousness of it. First Timothy 3:1 reads, “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.” An overseer, then, must be above reproach.

Now in these very few words at the outset of this wonderful chapter, I believe we have something of the essential quality of the calling of God into ministry outlined. I just want to draw out several thoughts.


## AN IMPORTANT CALLING

First of all, being called to pastor, being called into the ministry of the church, is an important calling. That is noted in the very way the chapter begins. “It is a trustworthy statement,” or “This is a true saying.” Now, that little phrase was a formula used in the early church. In fact, sometimes you know it as “This is a faithful saying.”

This phrase is used five times by Paul in the Pastoral Epistles. It is used only by Paul and only in the Pastorals. Unquestionably, this little saying was a formula used in those early years to identify some common axiom. An axiom is a self-evident truth. The church had come to the conviction that there were a number of self-evident truths. They became almost like bywords, common sayings, sayings that were so well developed and so often given in the early church that they were a common expression.

Paul is saying that this matter of a man aspiring to the office of overseer, aspiring to a very fine work, is a common saying, one that has been repeated oft and again. It has become one of the maxims, one of the self-evident truths, commonly expressed in the early church.

If the church was constantly repeating this phrase,



**In some ways, apart from the very work of God Himself in an individual's life, spiritual leadership is the most essential element of church structure. There is really no more important calling than this.**

so much so that it became a common expression, it is evidently a very important statement. This leads us to conclude that the call to leadership in the church's life was an utterly essential thing. The church was always talking about it. Being called to the ministry is an important calling.

Were we to take the time to go through the Book of Acts, we might stop at Acts 14, especially verse 23, and Acts 15 to see the importance of spiritual leadership in the church. We might also assess that theme in Acts 20. We might be reminded of it in Philippians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13. We might again stop long enough to look at Hebrews 13:7 and 17, to see again how utterly essential to the life of the church leadership is. And then we wouldn't forget, would we, 1 Peter 5, how important it is to shepherd the flock.

In some ways, apart from the very work of God Himself in an individual's life, spiritual leadership is the most essential element of church structure. There is really no more important calling than this.

The Lord has always sought for leaders. You can go all the way back into the Old Testament, 1 Samuel

13:14, and you read there, "The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart." You find again the words of Ezekiel 22:30, "I searched for a man among them who would ... stand in the gap before Me for the land." God has always looked for leaders. There is a great need in the church for spiritual leadership.

George Liddell wrote years ago:

Give me a man of God, one man  
Whose faith is master of his mind,  
And I will right all wrongs  
And bless the name of all mankind.

Give me a man of God, one man,  
Whose tongue is touched with heaven's fire,  
And I will flame the darkest hearts  
With high resolve and clean desire.

Give me a man of God, one man,  
One mighty prophet of the Lord,  
And I will give you peace on earth  
Brought with a prayer and not a sword.

Give me a man of God, one man,  
True to the vision that he sees,  
And I will build your broken shrines  
And bring the nations to their knees.

The church needs spiritual leaders, leaders who are willing to endure and suffer for the sake of objectives great enough to demand their wholehearted obedience.

Samuel Logan Brengle was one of the truly great leaders of the Salvation Army, a man of scholarship as well as singular spiritual power. He outlined the road to spiritual authority and leadership in very challenging words. Listen to his words:

Leadership is not won by promotion, but by many prayers and tears. It is attained by confessions of sin and much heart-searching and humbling before God, by self-surrender, a courageous sacrifice of every idol, a bold, deathless, uncompromising and uncomplaining embracing of the cross, and by an eternal, unflinching looking unto Jesus crucified. It is not gained by seeking great things for ourselves, but rather, like Paul, by counting those things that are gained to us as loss for Christ. That is a great price, but it must be unflinchingly paid by him

who would not be merely a nominal but a real spiritual leader of men, a leader whose power is recognized and felt in heaven, on earth and in hell.

God is looking for the noblest of men, because of the importance of that calling.

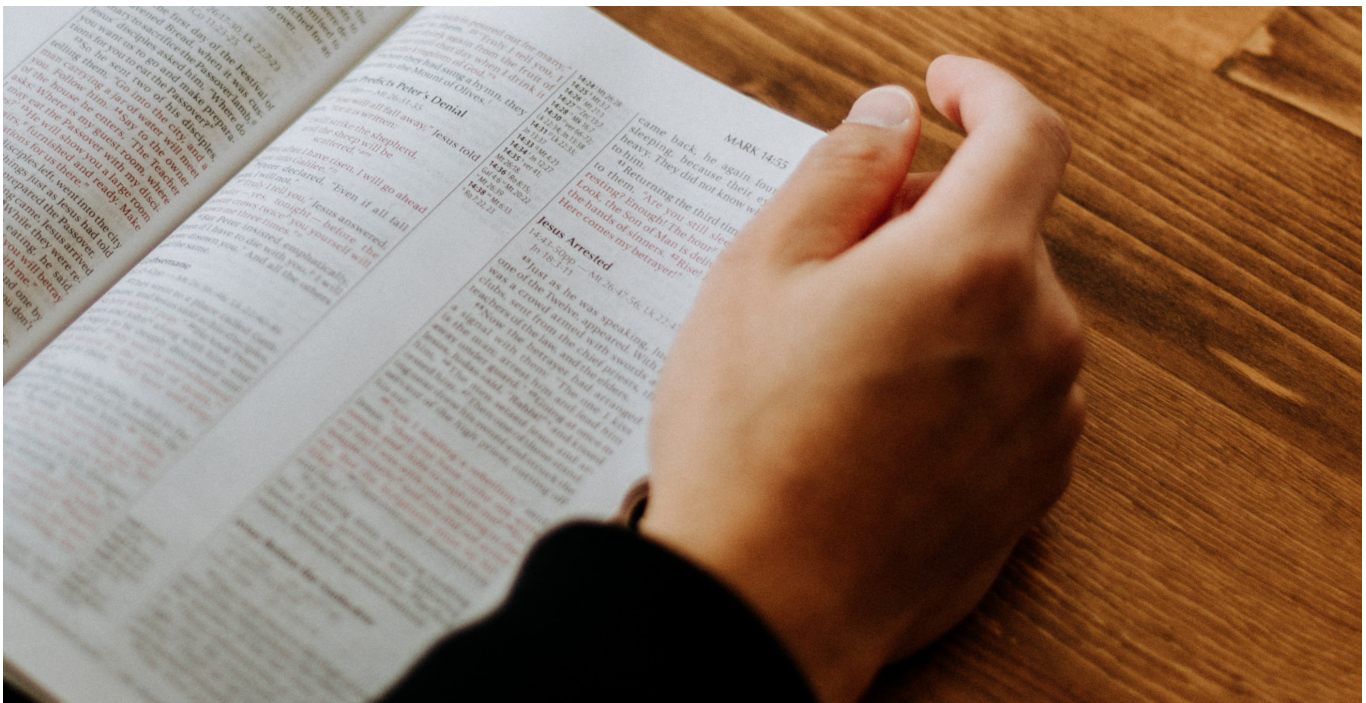
### AN IMPORTANT CALLING

Secondly, it is not only an important calling, but it is a limited calling. The verse reads, “If any man aspires.” Here we have a word in the masculine form, and I believe there is a limitation to men here.

It must be noted, by the way, that all the descriptive adjectives through verse 6 are in the masculine form. The point has already been made back in 2:11–15 that women are to receive instruction with submissiveness, and not to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet, and then there is reason given for that. This is a limited calling. It is a calling for godly men. It is a calling for men only.

No Old Testament priest was a woman. No Old Testament prophet with an ongoing prophetic office was a woman. Though a few women did speak for God occasionally, they had no ongoing prophetic ministry.

In the New Testament, there was no woman apostle,



# If ministry is not an all-consuming desire of the heart, then either the call of God is not there, or sin is there, which means the call of God is muffled.

no woman elder, no woman evangelist identified. No book of Scripture was written by a woman. That is not to say women are inferior. That is not true, not true at all. They have a different role. They are equal in spiritual privilege. They are equal in spiritual capacity. They are equal in spiritual blessing and blessedness. They are equal in spiritual promise. They are, in many cases, equal in spiritual effectiveness if not, in many cases, even more effective.

But when it comes to the teaching and the ruling office, that is limited. It is a limited calling. So, God is looking for some men to fill a very important calling, the most important calling in the world.

## A COMPELLING CALLING

There's a third thought that comes out of this verse. Not only is this calling important, not only is it limited to men, which narrows, as it were, the pool of available resources, but thirdly, it is a compelling calling. He says, "If any man aspires," or, "If any man desires, he then desires a fine work." Two times in this verse a word for desire is used.

These words emphasize the compulsion that is involved in the heart of a man. This calling is for those who are compelled. The first word means to reach out after, *oregō*, to stretch oneself to grasp something. It's used here in a couple of times in Hebrews.

The second word is the word *epithumeō*, which is often used in a negative sense for a wrongful

passion, but here for a rightful desire, a passionate desire. This is a calling that belongs to men of passion, who stretch out because they're passionately driven to this.

Earlier, I read a description of how a pastor ought to act, and some of you might be saying, "That kind of exhortation is too demanding for me to deal with." Others might be saying, "Let me have at that. In the power of the Spirit of God, that would be what I would like to be." The difference between these two is the compelling of the heart.

When men come to me for counsel about going into the ministry or the pastorate, I never compel them to make that choice. If ministry is not an all-consuming desire of the heart, then either the call of God is not there, or sin is there, which means the call of God is muffled. Either way, they aren't fit for ministry. If the call isn't there, or if the sin is there muffling the call, then who am I to call them to ministry?

Patrick Fairbairn said, "Such desire is not the prompting of a carnal ambition, but the aspiration of a heart which has itself experienced the grace of God, and which longs to see others coming to participate in the heavenly gift."


Jeremiah 45:5 says, "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them." I fear there might be some people today seeking church leadership for themselves. I doubt if that would be the case

in Paul's time as often as it is today. Oh, there were always some Diotrephes who rose to leadership because they sought the preeminence. But it would seem to me that because of the risks associated with the ministry in Paul's day, self-seeking people might have been a little more hesitant to pursue it. After all, there was risk, the danger of death, great difficulty, hard work, little pay, lots of trouble, and desire in those days might have been more generally the result of Christ-created motives.

But let me hasten to add, too, that even then the desire was not for the office, and the desire was not for the place, and the desire was not for the title.

The desire was for the work. Please note verse 1, "It is a fine work he desires to do." If you aspire to the office, that's a perverted desire. So also if you aspire to the place, to the title. If you aspire to the work, that's right.

Samuel Brengle once said, "The final estimate of men shows that history cares not for the rank or title a man has borne or the office he has held, but only the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart." Ambition for office corrupts, but compulsion to do God's work for the welfare of His church and the glory of His name is worthy of commendation." Paul was such a compelled man



**In Acts 20, the overseers are reminded that they have to take care of the church, which God has purchased with His own blood. It's a very wide range of responsibility. There is preaching. There is teaching, presiding, exercising care, wielding authority, discipline. That's the overseer.**



who said, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.”

Other men were equally compelled, I suppose. Hugh Latimer, the popular preacher of the English Reformation in the sixteenth century, was compelled to preach because of the lostness of the people, because of the emptiness of the clergy in the dead church of the dark ages. His famous “Sermon of the Plow” was given, and he called for men who would be true leaders of the church. Here’s what he said way back then:

And now I would ask you a strange question: Who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in all England, that passes all the rest in doing his office? I can tell, for I know who it is. I know him well. But now I think I see you listening and hearkening that I should name him. There is one that passes all the other and is the most diligent prelate and preacher in all England. And will you know who it is? I will tell you. It is the devil.

He is the most diligent preacher of all others. He is never out of his diocese. He is never from his cure. You shall never find him unoccupied. He is ever in his parish. He keeps residence at all times. You shall never find him out of the way. Call for him when you will, he is ever at home.

He is the most diligent preacher in all the realm. He is ever at his plow. No lording nor loitering can hinder him. He is ever applying his business. You shall never find him idle, I warrant you. Where the devil is resident and has his plow going, there away with books and up with candles, away with Bibles and up with beads, away with the light of the gospel and up with the light of candles, yea, at noon day, up with man’s traditions and his laws, down with God’s traditions and His most holy word. Oh that our preachers would be as diligent to sow the corn of good doctrine as Satan is to sow darnel or tares. There was never such a preacher in England as he.

Latimer concluded, “The prelates or preachers are lords and not laborers, but the devil is diligent at his plow. He is no unpreaching prelate. He is no lordly loiterer, but a busy plowman. Therefore, you unpreaching prelates, learn of the devil to be diligent

in doing of your office. If you will not learn from God nor good men to be diligent in your office, learn from the devil.” Now *there* is a passionate man.

Only men who are compelled to do the work should be in the ministry. The call might be a strong desire expressed in these words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: “The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but they while their companions slept were toiling upward in the night.” It is an essential call, an important call. It is a limited call. It is a compelling call.

### A RESPONSIBLE CALLING

Fourthly, it is a responsible call. He says, “If any man aspires to the office of overseer or bishop.” *Episkopos*, one who looks over. Bishop has become a term so covered with ecclesiastical trappings that it might be better just to use the term overseer, as the NAS does, but the term describes a spiritual leader, a pastor and a shepherd. It is a responsible calling. The responsibility is the oversight of the church.

In Acts 20, the overseers are reminded that they have to take care of the church, which God has purchased with His own blood. It’s a very wide range of responsibility. There is preaching. There is teaching, presiding, exercising care, wielding authority, discipline. That’s the overseer.

Probably the closest thing to this concept, in the time in which this text was written, would have been the overseers of the Qumran community, the heterodox Jewish sect of Essenes. These overseers in the Qumran community had the duty of commanding, instructing, receiving alms and accusations, examining people to determine their spiritual condition, dealing with sins, and generally shepherding the people.

Overseers had a wide range of responsibilities, and one should not pursue such responsibility apart from an understanding of its breadth. To rule clearly, to preach, to teach, to lay hands on and pray, to care for and love, to establish in the doctrine, to build up leadership and ordain them to set the pattern by example, and it goes on and on. Very, very serious.

In fact, the responsibility is so serious that Hebrews 13 says we have to give an account to God for everything we do, and so serious that if a leader falls into sin he needs to be publicly rebuked before

everyone. It's an essential and important calling. It's limited to men. It should come from a compelling passion, and one should understand the responsibility involved.

### A WORTHY CALLING

Fifthly, it's a worthy calling. Paul says, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer. It is a fine work he desires to do," a good work, *kalos*, a noble work, an excellent work, an honorable work. Here is the high estimate of the pastorate.

In the seventeenth century, Cotton Mather, that American Puritan, was having a powerful ministry in Boston. And in his directions for a candidate of the ministry, he wrote these words:

The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the most honorable and important that any man in the whole world could ever sustain, and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity. Consider the reasons why the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect and guilty men. The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher is to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men, to display in the most lively colors and proclaim in the clearest language the wonderful perfections, offices, and grace of the Son of God, and to attract the souls of men into a state of everlasting friendship with Him.

It is a work which an angel might wish for as an honor to his character, yea, an office which every angel in heaven might covet to be employed in for a thousand years to come. It is such an honorable, important, and useful office that if a man be put into it by God and made faithful and successful through life, he may look down with disdain upon a crown and shed a tear of pity on the brightest monarch on earth.

One of my spiritual heroes, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in *Preachers & Preaching* wrote, "To me, the work of preaching is the highest, and the greatest, and the most gracious calling, glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called."

Will Sangster of Westminster Central Hall in London wrote during the days of World War II, "Called to preach, commissioned by God to teach the word, a herald of the Great King, a witness of the eternal gospel. Could any work be more high and holy?" It is a worthy calling.

Way back in the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe wrote, "The highest service that men may attain to on earth is to preach the word of God. This service falls peculiarly to priests, and therefore God more straightly demands it of them. And for this cause Jesus Christ left other works and occupied Himself mostly in preaching, and thus did His apostles, and for this God loved Him. The church, however, is honored most by the preaching of God's word, and hence this is the best service that priests may render unto God. And thus if our bishops preach not in their own persons and hinder true priests from preaching, they are in the sins of the bishops who killed the Lord Jesus Christ." So noble a calling is it that to hinder it is to be as guilty as those who killed Christ. It is a noble, worthy calling.

### A DEMANDING CALLING

Sixthly, this verse tells us this is a demanding calling. He says it is a noble, fine, honorable work. It is a work. It is not just an honored position. It is a lifelong task.

Paul said to Timothy, "Do the work of an evangelist." To the Thessalonians, Paul wrote, "Honor those over you for their position," not "for their work's sake." Paul, in Ephesians 4:12, talks about the work of the ministry. It is a demanding calling. It is diligent, hard work.

And then, finally, it is a holy calling. Verse 2 (of 1 Timothy 3), "an overseer, then"—"then" takes us back—because it is an essential calling, because it is a limited calling, because it is such a compelling calling, because it is such a responsible calling, because it is such a noble calling, because it is such a worthy calling—not only a worthy calling, but a hard calling, a demanding calling. "An overseer, then, must be above reproach." He must understand it's a holy calling, because only a holy man could approach such a formidable task. ♦



*“The highest service  
that men may  
attain to on earth is  
to preach the word  
of God.”*

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JOHN WYCLIFFE



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# WHERE ARE THE PASTORS? FEEDING AND TENDING

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SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

**S**ome years ago, I watched a BBC documentary about a longtime friend who was also a member of the congregation I served. A distinguished microbiologist, she had devoted her professional life to the study of a mutation of a single virus. Because of her research, the U.K. government granted permission for “experimental” treatment to be given to patients with a life expectancy of only a few weeks. The results in some cases seemed miraculous. I congratulated her on the documentary (which was both thrilling and deeply moving) and said how gratifying it must be to have devoted her life to such important work. Her response was telling: “What I do isn’t really all that important. But what *you* do—that is *really*

*important.*”

The pastoral call—*really important*? More important than prolonging life? Yes, for if you are called to be an *episkopos* (“watchman”), then “if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul” (Ezek 3:21 ESV).

## THE PASTORAL CALLING

No one can write about the pastoral calling under the illusion he has been a model pastor. We share James’s confession: “we all stumble in many ways” (3:2). Furthermore, the models for ministry set before us are almost always the outstanding *preachers*. The interviews and comments that excite us in

# The entire New Testament is our pastoral manual. Each of its 27 books was written with a pastoral intention.

journals, blogs, and books are usually focused on the pulpit, not on the pastor's calling as a whole. Probably like most readers of *Expositor*, for each book I own on the work of the pastor, I have ten to fifteen on preaching. Where, then, are models to be found?

The entire New Testament is our pastoral manual. Each of its 27 books was written with a pastoral intention. They are all “profitable for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). This is true for believers in general. But in this context Paul's focus seems to be the pastoral calling specifically: “that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). “Man of God” here is virtually a technical term for Timothy as a gospel minister (cf. 1 Tim 6:11). In a quite specific sense, the New Testament contains 21 “pastoral epistles.” Delete everything that has pastoral intent in it, and little remains!

Module one, therefore, to understand and prepare for the pastor's calling is: absorb the New Testament, be absorbed in it, and be absorbed by it. It is the pharmaceutical manual of the spiritual physician.

No doubt the best and most biblical *practical* way to learn what the pastoral calling looks like is close association with a pastor. Such relationships constitute one of the great needs of our time. When I

have asked seminary students, “What pastor invested himself in you?” too often the answer has been “none.” Granted, there are exceptions, but are we not inclined to echo Paul's *mē genoito*—this ought not to be!

Yet all is not lost. For if we are rooted in module number one, we will discover that the apostles have allowed us to get near to them. Peter and Paul, especially, speak directly to the pastoral calling.

## **PETER: DECONSTRUCTED AND RECONSTRUCTED FELLOW PASTOR**

The very fact that Peter addresses the work of pastors should itself be a huge encouragement to us. He was once (as one of the best-known pastors in the United States described his earlier Christian life to me) “a basket case.” But Peter was wonderfully “reconverted” (Luke 22:32).

We are all familiar with the way triple-denying Simon Peter was deconstructed and reconstructed piece by piece at the lakeside:

Do you, who said “Even though they all fall away, I will not ... If I must die with you, I will not deny you” (see Mark 14:29, 31) and then denied me three times ... do you love me more than these? Then feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep (cf. John 21:15–17).



Jesus was not asking Peter if he loved Him more than he loved fishing, but if he loved Him more than the other disciples. His reply? “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (John 21:15–16). There is no room for comparison now in his mind. He had experienced a satanic deconstruction (Luke 22:51). But Christ’s deconstruction always has reconstruction in view. He does not break bruised reeds or extinguish faintly burning wicks (Isa 42:3).

Notice the two priorities Jesus sets for the pastoral calling. In one form or another, these ought to shape the first two questions asked of a candidate for pastoral ministry (yes, following the opening “getting to know you” conversation).

**As to the heart.** “Do you *love* Jesus Christ?” That is a “yes or no” question. William Cowper rightly taught us to sing:

Hark, my soul, it is the Lord!  
’Tis thy Savior, hear His Word;  
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee,  
“Say, poor, sinner, lovest thou Me?”

Lord, it is my chief complaint  
That my love is weak and faint;  
Yet I love Thee, and adore:  
Oh for grace to love Thee more!

But unless my answer is, fundamentally, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” the essential ingredient in pastoral ministry is missing. It is those who love Christ who *love* His sheep and lambs. Others *use* them.

The second question follows on with all the interconnectedness of the *Shorter Catechism*:

**As to the task.** “What do you see as the central task of the pastor?”

Imagine a young man being asked this question. His desire to become a minister is altogether appropriate. “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim 3:1). But what does he want to be and do in that office?

What if our candidate responds, “I want to teach the Bible. I love doing that”? He needs to be asked a follow-up question, doesn’t he? “Take a minute or two to tell us briefly why you love to teach the

Bible—but don’t rush; take your time.”

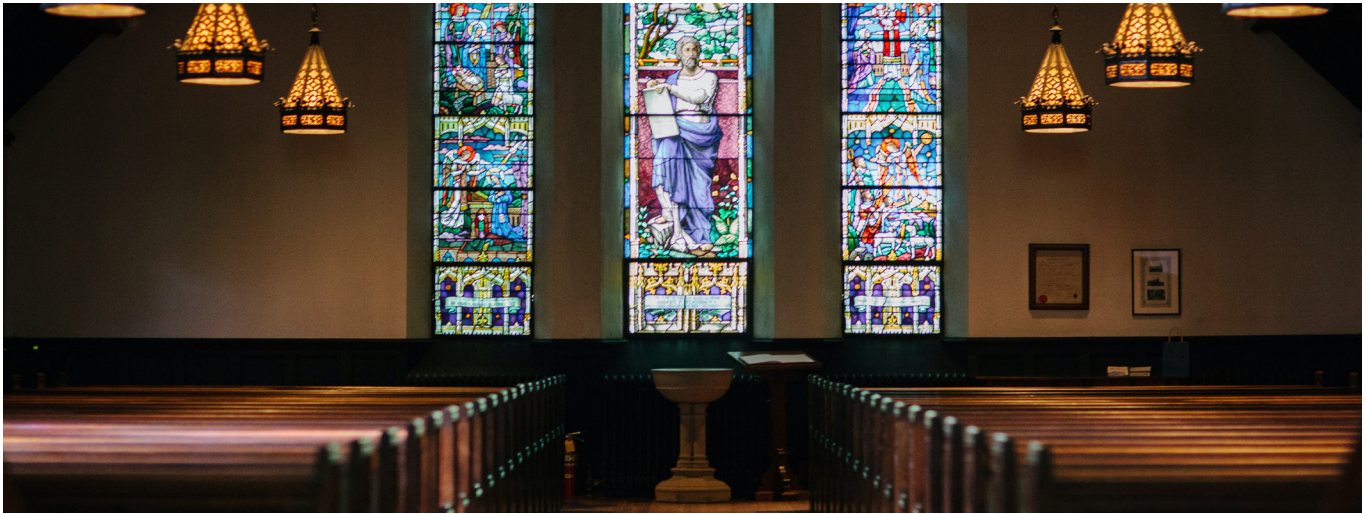
What if he answers now, “because I love to study the Bible myself” or “because I feel that most Christians don’t know the Bible very well” or “because I love expounding the Scriptures” or even “because I feel I come alive when I am teaching people from the Bible”?

Something is still missing. But what? Part of the answer lies in the fact that neither *studying* nor *teaching* the Bible is necessarily the same thing as *feeding* or *tending* the sheep and the lambs.

The significance of this distinction was brought home to me once by a deeply committed, highly intelligent, and ministry-supportive Christian couple I occasionally met with. Describing a decade-long ministry they had recently experienced, they commented, “We were *well instructed*, but we do not feel we were *well nourished*.” Therein lies the difference between being a teacher and being a pastor.

Instruction of the mind is an essential ingredient in the pastor’s calling (Romans 12:1–2 makes that crystal clear). But our people are not detached minds. They are people the Lord calls to love Him, yes, with the mind, but also with all the heart and soul. Our sheep are thinking people, but they are also physical, spiritual, volitional, and affectional. They need to be *fed* and *nourished* as whole people, not just instructed as intellects.

This perhaps explains why the Bible’s metaphors for the pastoral calling are a summons to care for and to love the church family. Hence Peter’s words, “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet 5:2), echo the Chief Shepherd’s words to him: “Feed my lambs ... tend my sheep ... feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17). The same emphasis is found in Paul’s exhortation to the elders of the church in Ephesus, “Pay careful attention ... to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to *care for* the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28, emphasis added here and below). There is something of the oxymoron about us referring to “my ministry” or “my congregation/flock.” They are His, not mine. Love for Him means love for them, not ownership of them. Well did Bernard of Clairvaux say, “Had I some of that blood poured forth on the cross, how carefully would I carry it; and ought I not to be as careful of



those souls that it was shed for!”

So, the task is *feeding* and *tending*. Of course, the food that is needed is the Word of God. Peter hinted at this when he urged his readers to “long for the pure spiritual milk” that would enable them to grow (1 Pet 2:2). Paul makes it even clearer.

### PAUL—LOCAL PASTOR

For an extended period of almost three years (the length of the average first pastorate in the U.S.), Paul served as the pastor of the church in Ephesus. His ministry there comes to expression in several different places in the New Testament. Luke records the story of his ministry in Acts 19:1–20:1 and 20:17–38; two of the Pastoral Epistles had Ephesus as their destination (1 Tim 1:3).

While Revelation 2:1–7 underlines for us that having Paul as your pastor is no guarantee of future faithfulness, he provides us with vital insights into the pastoral calling. For here it becomes clear that feeding the flock involves not only the *act* of preaching and teaching but also the *style* of ministry and the *disposition* that suffuses it.

At the heart of this ministry lay the regular preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Two details are worth noting:

***Paul taught the Word “daily” (Acts 19:9).*** The Western manuscript tradition adds: “from the fifth hour to the tenth” (i.e., from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m.). Whether or not this phrasing is original, it probably points to the reality. These were the hours when a philosopher’s lecture room would have been

available (even a professor named “Tyrannus” knew that Plato and Aristotle are not best studied during the siesta hours!). Some New Testament scholars (who in any case doubt Luke’s historical reliability) dismiss the intensity here out of hand. But they have probably never heard of the labors of a George Whitefield, nor read Richard Baxter’s *Reformed Pastor*. The latter tells us:

We [Baxter plus the two helpers he employed from his own stipend] spend Monday and Tuesday from morning almost to night in the work, taking about fifteen or sixteen families in a week, that we may go through the parish, in which there are upwards of eight hundred families, in a year ...

Given all the other occasions in the week he was engaged in the direct ministry of the Word of God, Baxter was approximating the workload of Paul (as Calvin and others had done in the previous century).

The point here is not to demean present-day ministers for falling short of Paul’s thirty-five-hour-a-week preaching schedule (!). Nor is it to raise the question of what our contemporary churches are doing to pour the Word with similar intensity into the hearts of our people. But it certainly underlines how central to the pastoral calling is the teaching of the Word of God. This helps to explain the wider impact of Paul’s pastorate: “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

The pastor's calling is to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort" (2 Tim 4:2—Timothy's preaching is to echo the ways in which Scripture is "profitable," 2 Tim 3:16).

But this is not done in isolation. There is an additional factor:

***Paul visited the flock in Ephesus domestically ("from house to house," Acts 20:20).*** Again, we may recall Baxter's comments:

For my part, I study to speak as plainly and as movingly as I can ... I have found by experience that some ignorant persons, who have been so long unprofitable hearers, have got more knowledge and remorse of conscience in half an hour's close discourse, than they did from ten years' public preaching.

How we transpose this apostolic and Puritan pattern into our very different societal lifestyle and diverse congregations presents an ongoing challenge. But the chief point here is Paul's personal contact with his flock, his individual care for them.

It is one of the most humbling things about pastoral ministry that it is so often the small things said


or done *personally* that linger in people's memories. The reason? Because it was their pastor who said or did them. They saw then that all our preaching and teaching was because we loved them and cared about them. Therein they saw the love of the Lord. As the elderly John Newton once wrote, "I believe my people would take anything from me now, *because they know I mean to do them good.*"

This loving care expresses the fact that the goal of pastoral ministry is not limited to understanding the gospel. That is a means to an end.

What, then, is this "end" or goal? Ultimately, of course, it is the glory of God. But what fruit most glorifies God in this context? Paul answers this question in two ways, one general the other more specific.

#### **THE GOAL OF THE PASTORAL CALLING**

***The goal of pastoral ministry is maturity.*** When Paul lists the foundational ministries of the word (apostle, prophet, evangelist) and the regular ministry (pastors and teachers, Eph 4:11), he describes the goal as bringing believers to the "unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, *to mature manhood*, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be



**The goal of pastors and teachers in their ministry of the Word is mature stability expressed in the transformation of the church family.**

children” but rather “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:13–15). Thus, the body of Christ begins to function well “when each part is working properly,” for then “it builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:16).


The goal of pastors and teachers in their ministry of the Word is mature stability expressed in the transformation of the church family. The ministries of the Word are to “equip the saints” for service. Paul’s verb (*katartizō*) is used in the Gospels of the disciples mending their nets in preparation for the following night’s fishing (Matt 4:21; Mark 1:19). This is what the ministry of the Word accomplishes. It brings illumination, but it also mends! Minds are clarified, but in addition, affections are cleansed and refreshed, wills are subdued, and hearts are redirected in love toward the Lord Jesus. This is not accomplished by biblical teaching in an *ex opere operato* fashion, but by truth communicated in the power and grace of the Spirit of truth through the affection and self-giving of the pastor. However indefinable

this may seem to be, we all recognize it when we are on the receiving end of it. Two men may preach the same sermon in completely different ways and with very different effects!

This leads to a second goal that Paul stresses:

**“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5).** In my own (Presbyterian) tradition, three messages are characteristically given at ordination or induction services: a sermon and then two “charges,” the first to the pastor and the second to the congregation. In my experience, charges to evangelical pastors usually major on preaching.

But this is only part of our charge, albeit an essential one. The other part is love. For the pastor’s love for the people, expressed in both the matter and the manner of his preaching, tends to permeate the life of a congregation. It is a daunting thought that, over the long haul, churches often mirror in significant ways the character and ethos of the ministry of the Word they receive, and of their minister. Whether



**While the character of the ministry of the Word is not the only means of effecting mutual love in the church family, over the long haul, exposition of the Word that is lacking in love can easily thwart it.**

this is *like creating like* or *like attracting like* is a question—there is probably an element of both! But it happens frequently.

So, while the character of the ministry of the Word is not the only means of effecting mutual love in the church family, over the long haul, exposition of the Word that is lacking in love can easily thwart it. And in a loveless day of alienation, dysfunctional relationships, and family disintegration, there is great need for churches to be marked by Christ-like, Spirit-infused, Word-fed love. Such a church family bears powerful testimony to the gospel, because then what is expressed in words amplified from the pulpit becomes audible in the “surround sound” heard in the fellowship of the congregation.

There is another important aspect of this. We have underlined that pastors are to feed Christ’s sheep from the Word. But this assertion needs to be fine-tuned. For it is still possible to “search the Scriptures ... that bear witness about [Christ], yet ... [never] come to [Christ] that you may have life” (John 5:39–40). Pastors are to explain the text, but always with a view to preaching Jesus Christ himself. They must not make the mistake of simply assuming that they are doing this because they engage in “systematic Bible exposition.”

Herein lies one difference between the man who loves teaching the Bible and the man who, because he loves the sheep of Christ’s flock, teaches the Bible in order to show them Christ Himself, “clothed in the gospel” (to use Calvin’s lovely description). For “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). These are not the words of Thomas Aquinas about participating in the Mass; they are the words of the Lord Jesus about trusting, receiving, knowing, and loving Him as He is fed to us in “the words that ... are spirit and life” (John 6:63).

Paul brings all this together in a single sentence that sums up his ministry: “*Him we proclaim*, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, *that we may present everyone mature in Christ*” (Col 1:28). What could be more arduous than this? No wonder he uses such strong verbs: “For this *I toil, struggling* with all *his energy* that he *powerfully works* in me” (v. 29). It is a remarkable testimony to the arduous nature of the pastoral

calling. It is not for wimps!

What, then, does this kind of pastoral ministry look like? Here we must limit ourselves to two passages:

**2 Corinthians 4:5:** “What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” Isn’t there something surprising about Paul writing about proclaiming Jesus as Lord and adding himself into the same sentence? But, in fact, he is taking us here to the heartbeat of his ministry, and the way it contrasts with that of the super-apostles (2 Cor 11:5). He is a servant of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1); but he is also the servant (*doulos*, bondsman) of the Corinthians. The pastor stands—on his knees!—to proclaim Christ. Jesus-like, he kneels to wash dirty feet to bring cleansing through the Word.

There may be occasions when a pastor needs to tell those he shepherds that this is how he sees his role (just as Paul did): “Christ is my Lord, but I want to be your servant for his sake.”

**1 Thessalonians 2:1–12.** In some ways this passage is even more remarkable because of the brevity of Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9). He had been prevented from seeing them again (1 Thess 2:17–18). But the array of the features of his pastoral care for them is impressive:

- His self-forgetfulness: “nor did we seek glory...” (vv. 5–6).
- His willingness to give up his rights: “we could have made demands as apostles of Christ” (v. 6).
- His gentleness: “like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (v. 7).
- His affection for them and self-giving to them: “being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (v. 8).
- His willingness to work to the point of exhaustion for their sake: “For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil (*ton kopon ... kai ton mochthon*): we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (v. 9).

- His consistent Christian walk before them: “You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers” (v. 10).

And lest we think that such a man would be unapproachable:

- His paternal love for them: “For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (vv. 11–12).
- His gratitude for them: “And we also thank God continually for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers” (v. 13).

This is the kind of pastoral ministry that can say in the presence of God: “The aim of our charge is love” (1 Tim 1:5). True, it comes to expression most publicly in the manner of our preaching. But here too, as Baxter shrewdly notes: “In preaching, there is a communion of souls, and a communication of somewhat from ours to theirs.” And that will be a communication of the pastor’s love, care, and devotion only if it is a leading characteristic of his life.

Such love is not a virtue we possess by nature. One man is more of a “people person” than another; some are wired to express love in more obvious ways than others. But the love of which Paul speaks is the fruit of the Spirit of God, not of our natural spirit. It is created in us, not by us. Yes, there is a concurrence here, as in other areas (Paul worked harder than anyone, but it was the grace of God that was with him, 1 Cor 15:11). Similarly, love for the flock is both gift and task. The pastor cannot but love his people; this is Christ’s gift *to him*, and it is also his gift *to them* in Him. He loves his people—even those who give him most hassle (if only they knew it!). Love both oils the wheels of his pastoral care and may also break his heart. C. S. Lewis’ words are true of pastoral ministry in a special way:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

Being “vulnerable” must not be reduced to the psycho-babble of some pastoral theories that equate it with our failures. The Latin *vulnus* means a wound. And the love which Christ creates in the pastor for the flock inevitably exposes him to being wounded. Like the Good Shepherd, he is called to give his life for the sheep (John 10:11). He gives his life for his flock (as well as, if required, giving it for them in death).

Thus, the ultimate model for pastoral ministry is found in the Good Shepherd. He knows the needs of his sheep and supplies them; he understands their spiritual hunger and feeds them; he sees their sin and failure and restores them; he observes them walking into valleys of deep darkness and goes with them; he knows they have enemies and spreads a well-provided table before them; he sees ways of expressing God’s goodness and mercy to them; he watches them growing ill and old, and walks beside them to the gates of glory (Ps 23:1–6; John 10:1–18; 1 Pet 5:4; Heb 13:20). What could be more important than this?

### TEMPTED TO IDOLATRY?

This article touches only the edges of the pastoral calling. But having begun it with a personal reflection, perhaps it is fitting to draw it together with one. I am a member of St. Peter’s Free Church of Scotland in Dundee. The name will ring a bell with many readers of *Expositor*. Robert Murray M’Cheyne was our church’s first minister. I often sit in the building and say silently to the walls, “Would that you could communicate what it was like to be in this packed building night after night when the people experienced an overwhelming sense of the



presence of God.”

A remarkable awakening took place here when M’Cheyne was pastor. *But it happened when he was not here.* In 1839, he had been sent on a church deputation to investigate the condition of the Jewish people. In his absence, the awakening came under the ministry of his locum, William Chalmers Burns. Despite M’Cheyne’s return, some of his people were so impressed by Burns that they would have preferred him to continue as their pastor. This, M’Cheyne said, broke his idolatry of St. Peter’s. His love for the people, his delight in God’s blessings in the church, had become tinged with the fact that they were *his* people, the fruit of *his* ministry.

I wonder whether one of the marks of a pastor after God’s own heart might be that the idolatry to which he is most prone is the idolatry of the congregation he serves—for they are his “joy and crown” (Phil 4:1). Perhaps if there is no danger of idolatry, there is no presence of love?

We look at great preachers and sometimes (perhaps too often) make them the benchmark of our aspirations. Perhaps we look less at seasoned pastors

and make them either our model or our benchmark. In either case, we need to remember that other men may be our examples, but they should never be our standard. We each stand or fall before our own Master (Rom 14:4). Christ does not give each of us identical gifts, or the same opportunities or energy levels. But he does call us all to love and faithfulness. Let that be our ambition. John Flavel says it with wisdom and balance:

I would discourage none that appear to have pious inclinations, matched with competent qualifications. Many be useful that cannot be excellent. Weaker gifts, rooted in a gracious heart, will grow by using; but nothing grows without a root. I think the plainest men have done the greatest service in the church of Christ; as tender-eyed Leah brought forth more children than beautiful Rachel. But still fidelity and prudence are indispensable qualifications.

If, indeed, we have received this ministry from the Lord, we will not lose heart (2 Cor 4:1, 16). For our

calling as pastors is, at the end of the day, to be able to echo Paul's words to the flock that the Lord Jesus has called us to shepherd:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the

Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant. (2 Cor 3:1–6)

Perhaps your flock is not an easy one to pastor. But then, neither was the church in Corinth. ♦

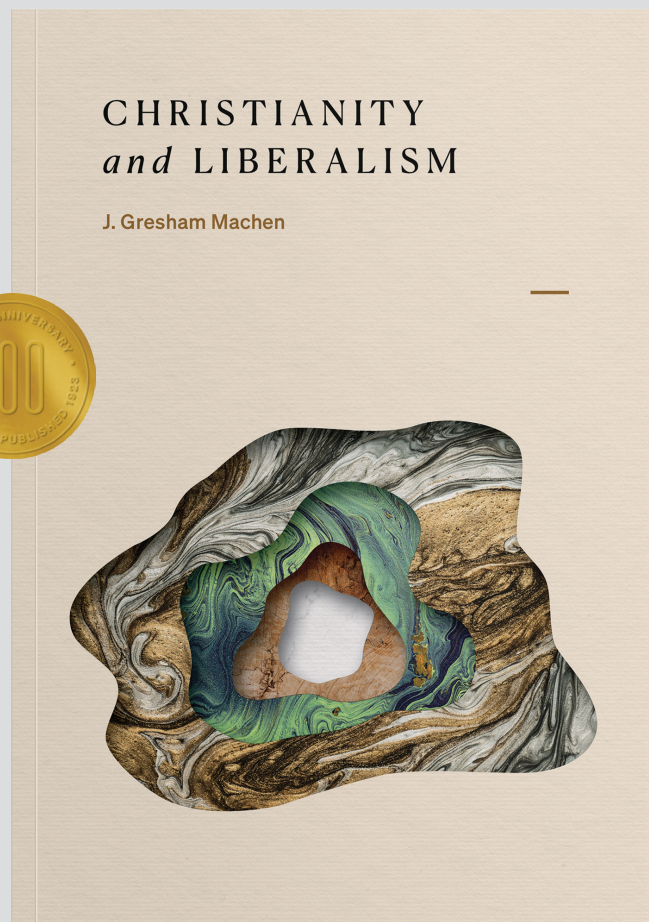


*Hark, my soul, it is the Lord!  
'Tis thy Savior, hear His Word;  
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee,  
"Say, poor, sinner, lovest thou Me?"*

*Lord, it is my chief complaint  
That my love is weak and faint;  
Yet I love Thee, and adore:  
Oh for grace to love Thee more!*

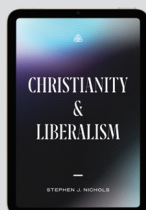
WILLIAM COWPER





## COURAGE OVER COMPROMISE

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# THE EXPOSITOR: A REFINING PROCESS

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DEREK W. H. THOMAS

**T**he preacher's personal walk with the Lord is key to effective ministry. Preachers who are not personally progressing in holiness (that is, Christlikeness; see Rom 8:29) are what Jesus called "whitewashed tombs" (Matt 23:27 ESV). It is not so much ability and giftedness that the Lord blesses; it is sincerity, authenticity, and transparent godliness. A pastor-preacher with no "back doors" (to cite a favorite metaphor of John Calvin) is a blessing indeed. The old adage "What you see is what you get" should characterize every servant of the gospel.

There is an urgency about what I write. Almost monthly, I hear stories of those who have given up on

"full-time" ministry. They are burnt out and cannot carry on. Guilt-ridden and crippled, they try other vocations, often with both relief from the stress and guilt at their inability to persevere. The redoubtable Charles Simeon, after a quarter-century of ministry in Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, wrote in 1807 that after a sermon he would "feel more dead than alive."

Christopher Ash writes candidly and most helpfully on this condition in his book *Zeal Without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice* (The Good Book Company, 2016). Another equally helpful treatment is by David Murray, *Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout*

*Culture* (Crossway, 2017). Included among the keys in Christopher Ash's book are chapters on such things as the need for sleep, the role of friends, and Sabbath rest. Those who experience burnout deserve our sympathy and prayers, for theirs is a path they would never choose without the most intense pain and distress.

Others have given up on pursuing the real goal of ministry—the glory of God—because they have instead fallen into the sin of self-glorification. Like the Jewish opponents of Jesus in John 5, they live for the buzz of receiving glory from one another (v. 44), despite Jesus' clear objective to “not receive glory from people” (v. 41). His was the path of self-denial, “empt[ying] himself” (Phil 2:7) and taking the form of a servant. In our world of celebrity preachers, we are often hoodwinked into concluding that blessing chiefly attends those who have the biggest churches and the most published books or the most Facebook friends or Twitter followers. But that is horribly distorted and shamefully crippling to the quiet but faithful preacher whose ministry radically shapes lives and rekindles life and vitality in a community of tens rather than thousands.

Preachers are not immune to the lust for recognition and importance. Whether they preach in a robe behind a marble pulpit or use a Perspex podium with the freedom to pace back and forth, preachers experience many moments when they are the center of attention. People hang on their words as though their lives depended on it—for their lives *do* depend on it! A speaker's insights into Scripture and the “control” over people's behavior it suggests can be a powerful drug. It is one of the reasons why a degree of maturity is required for those in ministry, not “a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Tim 3:6). Pride, so Augustine suggested, is of the essence of sin. Pride is essentially self-seeking and vainglorious—and preachers are not immune to its allurements. Addiction to this drug is deadly.

Walking worthy of the gospel is therefore a calling that requires effort and concentration. Is it ever the right thing to draw attention to oneself in ministry? Several considerations suggest that there are times when looking to ourselves is exactly what we need to do.

## LOOKING AFTER NUMBER ONE

Few scenes are more expressive of Paul's heart for ministry, and those who engage in it, than his charge to the Ephesian elders at Miletus. Fearful that they would not see each other again, he exhorted them (with tears), “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Those involved in pastoral care were to take heed of *themselves* first of all. The verb (*prosechō*) is an interesting one. The ESV translates the same verb in 1 Timothy 3:8 (a warning about alcohol abuse) as “addicted.” As bizarre as it might sound to modern ears, Paul is exhorting the Ephesian elders to be addicted to themselves—there are occasions when looking after number one is the ethically right thing to do!


It stands to reason, of course, that someone whose task is to exhort others to a life of godliness in response to the gospel of grace should himself reflect that holiness. To do otherwise would be hypocrisy, as Jesus warned: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt 23:27–28). The mask of feigned godliness and the impiety of public pretense cannot withstand the scrutiny of God's all-seeing, all-knowing examination of our hearts as ministers of the gospel. There is no hoodwinking the Almighty as to gossamer holiness on our part.

The author of Hebrews exhorts, “strive. . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (12:14). The exhortation is a general one, valid for every Christian, but its demand is especially needful for those whose lives are spent proclaiming the gospel.

## THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD

The Bible insists that “leaders” deserve respect. Hebrews is explicit on the matter: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. . . . Obey your leaders and submit to

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## It stands to reason, of course, that someone whose task is to exhort others to a life of godliness in response to the gospel of grace should himself reflect that holiness.

them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (13:7, 17). But this demand for submission is not without qualification. Heretics deserve no respect and are to be shunned: “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Tit 3:10–11; cf. Rom 16:17; 2 Pet 3:17). The phrase “stirs up division” is an attempt to translate the Greek word *hairetikos*, though the idea associated with the term “heretic” is of later origin. In view here is not bad theology so much as bad character. The preacher Paul has in mind is predisposed to contentiousness.

The point here is that preachers and teachers cannot demand respect—a hearing, if you like—without any qualification. There must be a resonant godliness that accompanies what they say, and even precedes it. Consider the oft-cited sayings of Robert Murray M’Cheyne, the nineteenth-century minister of St. Peter’s, Dundee, in Scotland, who died shortly before his thirtieth birthday:

A man is what he is on his knees before God, and nothing more.

Study universal holiness of life. Your whole usefulness depends on this, for your sermons last but an hour or two; your life preaches all the week. If Satan can only make a covetous minister a lover of praise, of pleasure, of good eating, he has ruined your ministry. Give yourself to prayer, and get your texts, your thoughts, your words from God.

Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be.

The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness.

These are very familiar quotations from a young man whose ministry barely lasted seven years. Each statement is a powerful call to Christlikeness as our chief aim and concern. Without this holiness, the task of ministry is futile and worse, destructive. Without godliness, we will sow the seeds of hypocrisy. As M’Cheyne also suggested, each time we enter a pulpit (or stand behind a podium, or pace frenetically up and down, gesticulating wildly for



emphasis), a shadow is cast on the wall behind us that says, “This man is a clown, a charlatan, a pretender, an actor” (the root meaning of “hypocrite”).

### SIN AT THE POINT OF GREATEST USEFULNESS

If pride and vainglory are powerful combatants to faithful ministry, something far subtler also lurks to bring us down. The failure is not so much what lies secretly hidden in private life; the failure lies in the very acts of holiness itself. For in our most holy moments—in public prayer or preaching or counseling—sin lies on the very surface. It often stares at us while we engage in the task of ministry. Sin is never greater than at our point of greatest usefulness.

It is at one level utterly astonishing and unexpected that Isaiah utters his “woe is me” statement. Following the magnificent *Trisagion*—the threefold utterance of God’s holiness in Isaiah 6—the prophet becomes excruciating awareness of his own personal sin and ungodliness.

Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips,  
and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;  
for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts! (Isa 6:5)

Isaiah saw the Lord “high and lifted up and seated upon a throne.” He glimpsed the spectacular sover-

eignty and majesty of God. And the sight of it undid him.

From one point of view, Isaiah had the cleanest lips in Israel! He was a prophet, one anointed of the Lord to speak God’s Word in proclamation and prophecy. His life, by all accounts, seemed outwardly impeccable. Wasn’t he one of the greatest of all the prophets that ever lived? And yet, at the point of his greatest usefulness—the use of his lips in declaring the Word of God—he utters his most intense conviction of shortcoming. It is here, in his mouth, that he feels his sin the most. It is not so much what he does in secret that offends him—and that most assuredly *does* offend him; it is what he is in public, at the point where others see and hear him, that offends him the most.

Our greatest sins are not necessarily in the dark and unseen areas of our life. They are in the pulpit, when God’s Word is uttered without faith, His gospel handled without care, His Son described without passion, His promises uttered without joy, His threats expressed without conviction.

Who is equipped for such a task as ministry? The high calling of office in the church of Christ should make us nervous. At one point, the Lord told Jeremiah not to be “dismayed” at the thought of public ministry (Jer 1:17). The Hebrew word suggests something like “to be shattered, or filled with terror.” It is a feeling all preachers have had at some point in their ministry. Facing a hostile church, a tense meeting of the deacons or elders, preaching

on a topic that is countercultural (like, for instance, the issue of complementarity in male-female roles in marriage or the barring of women from the eldership)—these can make the strongest knees shake. And in these cases, the promise given to Jeremiah is welcome indeed: “And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls” (Jer 1:18).

Or take Ezekiel, God’s “watchman” (Ezek 3:16–21). Failure to warn “the wicked” or “the righteous ... [who] turns from his righteousness and commits injustice” (Ezek 3:20) brings guilt—“his blood I will require at your hands” (Ezek 3:18). This is a fearful responsibility. A failure to preach about hell—its reality and awfulness—is an act of cowardice and culpability. No preacher should fail to see the balance of Scripture, offering heaven for those who repent and trust in Jesus Christ as He is offered in the gospel, and warning of hell for those who refuse the gospel. And it is tempting, all too tempting, to be drawn to emphasize one more than the other.

I have known preachers who never speak of hell, even though I am certain they believed in its existence. And I have known preachers who seemed always to be angry and threatening, and I fear that something of their own personal struggles emerged in the pulpit in the guise of “faithfulness” to Scripture. Getting the balance right is difficult, and only a close familiarity with the Scriptures will ensure a clear and undivided path.

### A SERVANT

Returning to Isaiah and his vision in chapter 6, perhaps the most astonishing aspect of this vision is the task he was asked to perform. He must preach to deaf ears!

“Go, and say to this people:

‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’

Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,

and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.” (Isa 6:9–10)

God commands Isaiah to preach a message that will harden the hearts of those who hear it. It is one thing to be asked to do a difficult task in expectation of great reward and gain (thousands of converts!); it is another to be asked to be faithful to a task that will reap only rebuttal and disdain. God calls all preachers to be *faithful*, and he calls some preachers to be faithful rather than *successful*.

Walking worthy (to cite Paul’s general exhortation to all Christians in Ephesians 4:1) of the calling we have received is costly. Compliance with “demand” and “law” should not be viewed as a lapse into legalism, for all Scripture’s exhortations to holiness are gospel based. We obey *because* we have been saved from any suggestion that obedience will save us. Our obedience is a response to grace received. It is a way of saying “thank you.”

But what does *ministerial* holiness look like?

### AN EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW

I am frequently taken aback by Paul’s insistence that Christians he knew (and who knew him) follow his example. He writes to the Thessalonians saying that the gospel had come to them “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” and adds, “You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake” (1 Thess 1:5). The power of the preached Word was in direct proportion to the character of those who proclaimed it.

In the following chapter, he adds another reference to the same effect: “You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers” (1 Thess 2:10). Similarly, Paul exhorts Titus to “show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity” (Titus 2:7). Likewise, he exhorts young Timothy, “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” (1 Tim 4:16).

Of all Paul’s exhortations to godliness in ministry, none are more startling than those he makes to the Corinthians:

“I urge you, then, be imitators of me.”  
(1 Cor 4:16)

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”  
(1 Cor 11:1)


These urgings to imitate the apostle appear counterintuitive. Our reflex is to say, “Whatever you do, don’t follow my example! I’m a failure like everyone else.” Indeed, there are those who seem to highlight a “celebratory failurism” so that the focus is entirely on the gospel.

In one sense, Paul approves this inclination. He cites a saying that was already circulating among early Christians: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). Whether or not the final statement was part of the saying or something Paul adds is unclear. In any case, Paul is drawing attention to his sin and thereby puts emphasis on the fact that Jesus *saves*—it is *all* of Him, from beginning to end. We contribute nothing. Even our faith is a gift of God, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:9). As C. H. Spurgeon said, “Our prayers have stains in them, our faith is mixed with

unbelief, our repentance is not so tender as it should be, our communion is distant and interrupted. We cannot pray without sinning, and there is filth even in our tears.”

If all we do (and all the apostle does) is sinful, how can Paul ask his readers to follow his example? The answer seems to lie in Paul’s equal insistence on measureable, discernible, progressive sanctification as a mark of what the gospel produces in us. This line of thinking requires a little conjugation.

- Nothing we do can make us more justified than we already are in Christ. Forensically and legally, we (Christians in union with Jesus Christ) are as righteous as Christ Himself. His spotless robe of obedience is credited to our account. When God looks at us, He sees the purity of His Son reflecting back. This is why Paul moves inexorably from justification to glorification in the golden chain (to cite what the Puritan William Perkins called it) of Romans 8: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom



**The gospel urges us to aim for the good—holiness, which is Jesus-likeness. Our faith-union with Christ is “we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).**



he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (vv. 29–30). Once God decides on a course of action, there is no stopping Him!

- All growth in sanctification is impossible apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Think of Philippians 2:12–13, where we are told to “work out our salvation,” but this working is God’s working in us. And there is little point in drawing attention to the synergy of God’s action and ours, as though a fair comparison is being made. What, after all, are our puny efforts compared to the actions and determination of a sovereign, omnipotent God?
- This indubitable fact that we have just mentioned—that God is at work in us accomplishing His purposes of grace and salvation—does not lessen the demand for effort on our part. Salvation is not a “let go and let God” affair. We must engage in purposeful effort and sweat. We are to pursue it with effort and grit. We must entertain the idea that apart from it, we can drift away, slip our moorings (cf. Heb 2:1), and possibly discover that our profession of faith was a mere sham. There are those who professed much and fell away, unable to be restored again to repentance (Heb 6:6). We have known some, and the thought of it should make us tremble.
- Every act of obedience on our part is imperfect. This side of heaven, the “good” we would do is never good. “Nothing good dwells in me” (Rom 7:18–19).
- The gospel urges us to aim for the good—holiness, which is Jesus-likeness. Our faith-union with Christ is “we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

These are points that all Christians who believe what the Bible says should agree upon. Some, however, recoil if the latter point is pressed a little further. Should Christians try to “please God,” or is this essentially legalistic? Paul answers the question simply when he tells the Corinthians that he made it his aim “to please” Christ (2 Cor 5:9). It is therefore appropriate to ask, is the degree of my holiness such that it would encourage others to follow?

The soil out of which powerful preaching grows is the godliness of the preacher. Preaching doesn’t merely “happen.” It is shaped by what we as preachers *are*—in the totality of who we are in public and private. Actors are different. They can be Mephistopheles or Hamlet on the stage or in a movie and convince us that they really are the person they portray. Gary Oldman has been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor for his recent portrayal of Churchill in the movie *The Darkest Hour*. But he also portrayed James Gordon, the police commissioner of Gotham City, with equal credibility in the *Batman* trilogy. In real life, he is an entirely different person.

Preachers dare not be one thing in the pulpit and another in private. But such disparity does exist. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns of those who possess gifts for ministry who are devoid of holiness (Matt 7:21–23). There have been, of course, examples of preachers whom the Lord has used to great effect, but who turned out to be scoundrels leading a double life. Why would the Lord use a hypocrite to further His kingdom? It is profoundly disturbing to contemplate, and when exposed does great harm to the kingdom of God. It breeds cynicism and distrust of other preachers and the gospel itself. This is a mystery. But it is also a fact. And we who preach and teach must face the awful possibility that great deeds may be accomplished in Jesus’ name, even though, at the end, Jesus will say, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt 7:23). There will be preachers in hell. That thought should make us tremble.

### **THIS COULD NOT HAPPEN TO ME!**

David was Israel’s greatest king. He was “a man after God’s own heart” because of his extraordinary devotion to the Lord (1 Sam 13:14). David was a poet, musician, and warrior—a Renaissance man. And for all that, he is also known as the greatest sinner in the Bible. His adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and the consequent cover-up that led to the killing of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, is wicked and shameful in the extreme. And the note that closes the chapter that tells the sordid story rings like a tolling bell: “the thing that David had done

displeased the Lord” (2 Sam 11:27). The progression in David’s sin reveals a hardening of his heart. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, David would not have repented and given us Psalm 51, which records the trajectory from despair to gratitude for gospel grace.

Of some significance in David’s fall is the fact that David was neglecting his duty as king. When his men were at war in the spring of the year, David remained in Jerusalem (2 Sam 11:1).

Duty! Yes, it is an appropriate word for “ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6). Preachers and teachers of the gospel are under obligation to obey God’s commands. Was David’s infidelity the result of a belief that he was somehow invincible? Had David gained such a familiarity with grace that he believed he could skate on the thin ice of temptation and not fall through it? Was David suddenly tempted to believe that a little flirtatiousness wasn’t such a great sin and that he knew when to stop? Or was David’s sinning the inevitable consequence of a pattern of laziness toward maintaining his relationship with the Lord, a laziness that sowed the seed of habit and a pattern of response? It certainly looks this way.

As James points out, there is a predictable progression to temptation: “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15). Temptation begins with desire. It is a thought, a fantasy, that unless checked inevita-

bly grows and matures into a full-blown act. David’s sin probably began a long time before he first caught sight of Bathsheba bathing on a nearby rooftop. David was a long way past voyeurism. His mind was already dulled to the consequence of illicit sex. Inviting her to the palace would end in only one way.

The passage has “warning” written all over it. Those involved in ministry at the highest level should never presume “this could never happen to me.” No life is immune from temptation, and given the right circumstances—neglect of one’s devotional life, occasional flirtation based on the false belief that we can stop the trajectory any moment we please—the best can fall. As the sixteenth-century Puritan John Bradford allegedly commented when seeing a group of prisoners pass by, “There go I but for the grace of God” (cf. 1 Cor 15:10).

Gospel ministry is an inestimable privilege. To spend one’s days, even the worst of them, in a calling that coincides with our inclination, is an opportunity not granted to all Christians. For many (Christians and unbelievers), work “under the sun” amounts to misery and fruitless toil (cf. Eccl 2:18). Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it this way: “What is the chief end of preaching? I like to think it is this: it is to give men and women a sense of God and His presence.” And if we are to do that—give men and women a sense of God and His presence—we will need to walk worthy, reflecting the beauty of the gospel that we proclaim. God give us grace to do so. ♦



*The thing that makes the Christian message a gospel is that it is a proclamation of the good news.*

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES



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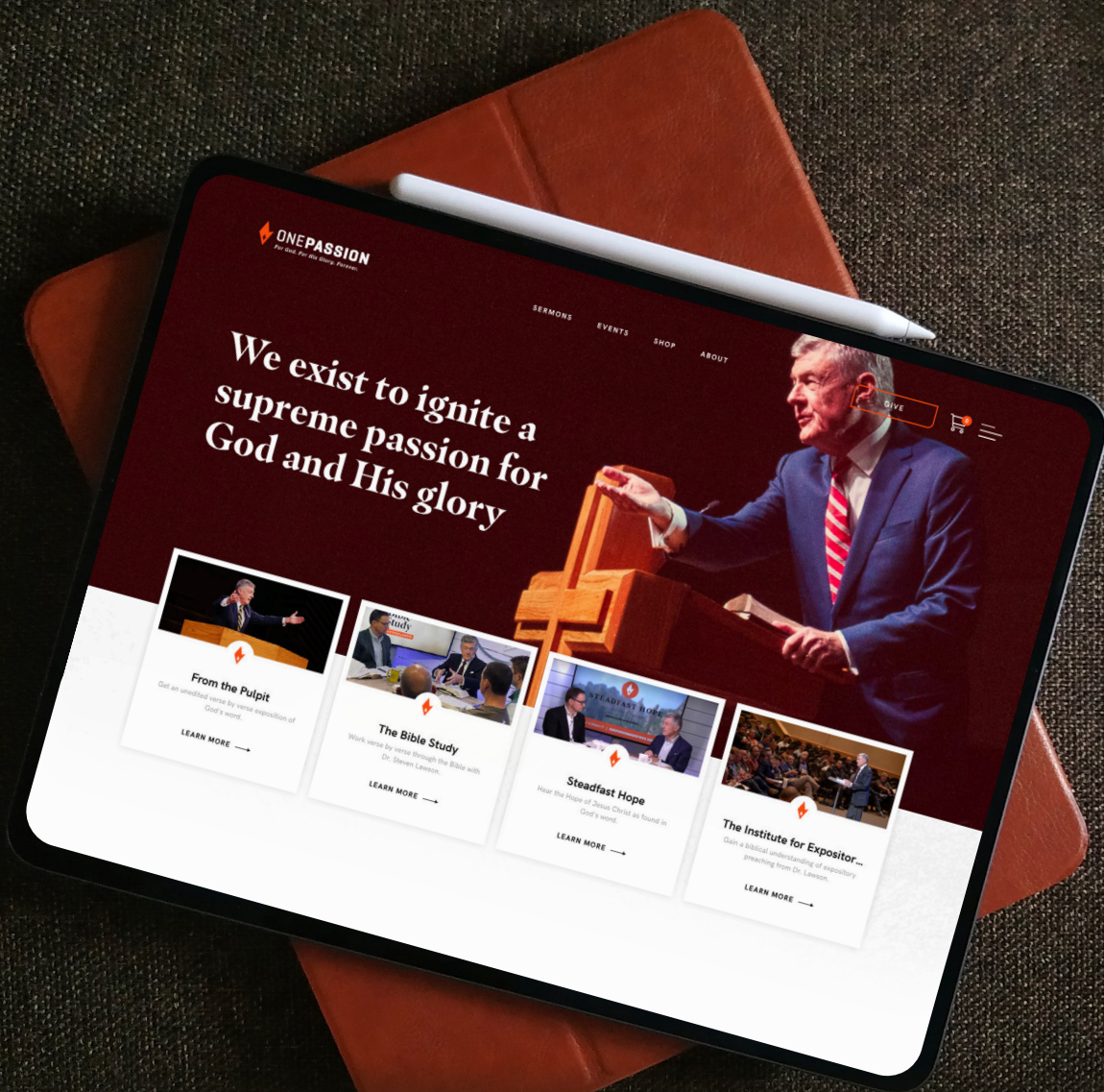
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