

MINISTRY AND CHARACTER

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Once we have embarked upon a life of ministry, we will be confronted with agonizing and persistent questions like “How am I doing?” and “How will I know how I’m doing?” At the unconscious (and conscious) levels, we begin flailing about for a way to answer those questions. One of the keys to the rest of your life as a minister is to find a way to answer them. What test will you use?

THE TEST OF SUCCESS

Because many of our everyday practices and business models operate on the premise of success, bottom lines, profits, and assets, we are prone to gauge ministerial effectiveness in the same way.

THE RISE OF SUCCESS CRITERIA

Today there is far more pressure than ever before on ministers to be “successful.” The very idea of success is something of a new way to judge ministers. The older criteria for evaluation had more to do with doctrinal accuracy, loyalty, and consistency of discharging duties. But no one can deny that these measurements have been eclipsed by the criteria of success. Today’s churches and congregations seek successful ministers and dismiss less successful ones. It is also true that ministers hold themselves to the standards of success of increasing numbers and expanding budgets.

THE ANATOMY OF SUCCESS

According to Avery Dulles, the modern notion of ministerial success is not so much about simple church growth as it is about the minister’s ability to attract large numbers of people by his personal appeal, and then to create powerful religious experiences for them.¹ I suppose this should not come as a surprise, since it’s a direct result of the expressive individualism of modern Western culture, which has replaced the community-first loyalties of former generations. Individuals have been taught to be consumers, not only of retailers and merchants, but also of institutions and organizations. They will go to a church only if (and as long as) its worship and public speaking is riveting and attractive.

Individuals have been shaped by the culture to think of their own happiness and prosperity first and to avoid letting commitments to any group or institution become a barrier to finding personal fulfillment. The concepts of service and sacrifice are viewed as psychologically unhealthy. Even if a Christian is able to shed this radically individualistic worldview at a personal level, the culture pushes him or her in this direction anyway. The jobs landscape alone plays a major role in the isolation and consumerism of individuals: today’s jobs demand long hours, extended travel, and often multiple moves to different cities, not to mention that companies can fire employees at the drop of a hat. It is, therefore, quite difficult and unlikely for one to “stay put,” to avoid transience, and to commit long term to a community. This means even community-minded Christians are constantly moving to new places and “church shopping” once they get there. It is nearly impossible, with our insidiously individualistic lenses, to look for a new church in terms of where to serve instead of how it meets the needs of our

1. See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974).

family. It is culturally improbable to think in terms of long-term service to a Christian community, or of where your gifts and calling might fit in. Instead, we all tend to naturally think and act like a consumer, not a servant.

THE CHURCH'S EMBRACE OF SUCCESS

During the 1970s and 1980s, one of the most influential schools of thought in seminary circles was the “church growth” movement founded by Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner. For more than twenty years, there was a seemingly never-ending stream of books written at the popular level for pastors on “how to grow your church.” At first only evangelical churches embraced the movement, but eventually even mainline churches, faced with dwindling numbers, began to heed it as well. This movement brought many good and probably permanent changes into the modern-day ministry. But it also put an enormous amount of pressure on the average pastor. The impression given by these popular church growth books (and there were hundreds produced during a twenty year span!) was that church growth was the product of following a series of “ten steps” or achieving attainable measurements, the result of which left pastors feeling that if their church was not growing then they must be incompetent. Many critics, looking back on the movement of those years, have rightly surmised that it was in large part influenced by the general cultural drift toward individualism and consumerism. It was in some forms and in some ways an over-adaptation to the broader culture.

THE TEST OF FAITHFULNESS

In the 1990's there began to be a major pushback to the church growth movement, resulting again in the printing of books that this time stressed faithfulness rather than growth as the primary test of ministerial effectiveness. This movement has also passed into our practice of ministry in the West and had a very good effect.

One of the leading proponents of this reaction to church growth has been Eugene Peterson. For the pastor under the pressure of success-oriented criteria, Peterson's books are like a cool breeze in the desert. He stresses the classical resources of pastoral theology and emphasizes the traditional pastoral duties: the cultivation of the inner life through contemplation and prayer, the recovery of the art of providing spiritual counsel and direction to another, and the building of intimate church community through visitation and other practices. Peterson vehemently opposes the notion of pastor-as-CEO and presses for a pastor-as-shepherd model. He provides a much-needed counter-balance to the excesses of the church growth era of the 1970s and 80s. Some have pointed out, however, that Peterson's model can also induce guilt, because it is almost unrealistic in its demands for solitude, prayer, and unhurried pastoring in a hyper-paced world.

Another way in which the church has experienced backlash to the success criteria has been the missional church focus, such as The Gospel and Our Culture network led by Darrell Guder, Craig Van Gelder, and George Hunsberger, as well as a variety of other thinkers.² These thinkers have been heavily influenced by the Anabaptist tradition and by Alasdair MacIntyre, author of the seminal book *After Virtue*³; great emphasis is given to the building of robust, countercultural Christian communities and the pastoral skills that such communities require. This sensibility meshes well with Eugene Peterson's work and its reaction to the mega-church movement.

2. Many of these have taught at Fuller Seminary (including Miroslav Volf, James William McClendon, Jr, and Nancy Murphy) and Duke (Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, and Richard Hays). See also Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1998).

3. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

For all its needed corrections, it is important not to oversimplify the successful-versus-faithful continuum. It is also helpful to realize that such classification is not new. In Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* written nearly 150 years ago, Spurgeon wrote that it takes more than faithfulness to make a minister:

“Certain good men appeal to me who are distinguished by enormous [passion] and zeal, and a conspicuous absence of brains; brethren who would talk for ever and ever upon nothing—who would stamp and thump the Bible, and get nothing out of it all; earnest, awfully earnest, mountains in labor of the most painful kind; but nothing comes of it all... therefore I have usually declined their applications.”⁴

This is a painful paragraph. Notice that Spurgeon has obvious affection for these men. He is not ridiculing them and says they are, in fact, faithful and deeply committed to the work of the minister, but because “nothing comes of it all” he declines their application to his college for ministers. In other words, he doubts God has called them, because when they teach there is little or no learning, and when they evangelize there are few or no conversions. Therefore, it is an oversimplification to say that faithfulness is either the preferred criterion (as compared to success), or that it should be the sole criterion.

THE TEST OF FRUITFULNESS

I would propose then, that a more biblical gauge of ministerial evaluation than faithfulness or success is fruitfulness. From the depiction of the Hebrew nation as a vineyard to Jesus' famous “abide in the vine” speech, it is hard to miss the analogy of fruitfulness in the Bible. More specifically to pastors, the apostle Paul outlined fruitfulness as the test for his emerging ministry:

- + First, there is the fruit of new converts to the gospel. Paul told the Roman Christians that he desired to come and preach in Rome “that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles” (Rom. 1:13).
- + Second, there is the fruit of godly character that a minister can see growing in Christians under his care. This character is called the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22). And good deeds such as mercy to the poor is called “fruit” (Rom. 15:25-27).

Biblical theology guarantees that God's word and those who have been called to minister his word will bear fruit. Why? The doctrine of election! In Acts 18:9-10, God told the apostle Paul that his ministry would be successful: “Keep on speaking... because I have many people in this city.” When Paul preached, “as many as were ordained to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). Many ministers of the gospel, however, have used the doctrine of election to rationalize the lack of fruit in their ministry. But actually, the doctrine of election assures fruit. “You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (John 15:16). If you are called to the ministry, then you will bear fruit, fruit guaranteed by the calling and election of God.

The biblical analogy of fruitfulness is often extended as a metaphor and likened to gardening. In gardening, the skills and faithfulness of the gardener represent only two factors in determining the overall success of the garden. The fruitfulness of the garden will vary greatly in response to other conditions, such as soil composition (some groups of people have a greater hardness of heart), weather conditions (God's sovereign Spirit), and seasonal activity. In 1 Corinthians 3:6 Paul used the

4. Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Selection from Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Pastors' College, Metropolitan Tabernacle, London* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1876), 34.

gardening and seasonal metaphor when he wrote that some ministers plant, others water, and still others reap the harvest. This helps us understand that a seed-sowing season could easily be mistaken for fruitlessness. It also allows us to contemplate the importance of farmer-like patience (James 5:7-8) and to have “expectancy as well as patience.”⁵ We must take the long view of our work, while at the same time being deeply concerned by any sustained season of fruitlessness.

In summary, the church growth movement provided many important and lasting contributions to modern-day ministry.⁶ Likewise, the reaction to the church growth movement has helped us, especially Protestants, recover ancient resources that emphasize pastoral contemplation, spiritual direction, and community building. In the end, however, the biblical paradigm of fruitfulness is probably our best criterion for ministerial evaluation, while also allowing us to benefit from the literature on both church growth and faithfulness.

THE CAUSES OF FRUITLESSNESS

It goes without saying that a criterion of fruitfulness will challenge us to look for causes of any long-term lack of fruit. As alluded to earlier, a possible cause may be that one has not truly been called to be a pastor. Most often, however, the causes can be traced to the roots of pride, indulgence, cowardice, or hypocrisy.

PASTORAL PRIDE

As in most other areas of life, pride is often the culprit for a lack of fruitfulness, because its insidious grip entangles us in many areas.

First of all, pride makes us more concerned with popularity and applause than with fruitfulness. Although, as we have seen, we complain about the pressure of success criteria, we put it on ourselves out of pride. Pride makes us compare ourselves to other ministers, creates envy, and as a result, allows for very little mutual dependence and encouragement among pastors. If your church flourishes in the more visible ways of numbers and programs and finances, you will be overly happy about it and tempted to derive your self-worth from it rather than from who you are in Christ. This misplaced identity can lead to a domineering spirit and unwise decision making. If, on the other hand, your church is not flourishing in these more visible ways, you may become excessively discouraged. Why? Because your pride evaluates your self-worth on the progress of your church rather than on your identity in Christ. So being both excessively inflated or overly deflated by visible success is caused largely by pride and a lack of orientation to the gospel. Your worth and identity rises and falls not on being a rescued and loved sinner, but on being an effective minister.

Secondly, pride makes us defensive when criticized. We don't make it safe for people to give us negative feedback. We become angry or argumentative, such that people avoid giving any type of critical feedback. Or, because the critic has a bad attitude or has exaggerated what is wrong (one of which is usually the case), our defensive pride focuses on these things in order to dismiss any truth in the critique and avoid the pain of repentance. In this way, the changes required to make us more effective never occur.

5. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry, With an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency, and with an Especial Reference to the Ministry of the Establishment* (London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1830), 98.

6. Harvie Conn and Manny Ortiz, who have been critics of unbalanced Church Growth theory, do an excellent job of summarizing the lasting contributions of the movement to mission and ministry in chapters 14 through 17 of their book *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, & the People of God* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

A third form of pride that can derail ministers is a type of tribal arrogance that elevates our own church models and denominational traditions above others and makes us scornful of those with different theological opinions.

For helpful insights into pastoral pride, I recommend the reading of George Whitefield's *Journals*. He wrote the *Journals* when he was a very popular preacher in his 20s, and his early popularity led him into being more obstinate and uncharitable in his remarks and ministry than he should have been. Years later, having matured in both his ministry and humility, he edited the *Journals* and had many of his intemperate and proud statements removed.⁷

PASTORAL INDULGENCE

We must tread carefully here. Many pastors are workaholics, driven by harmful motivations. But it seems to me that our culture's spirit of expressive individualism has affected ministers in the extremes of either overwork or idleness. While many ministers in previous generations tended to sacrifice without complaint, even when being treated unjustly by others, there are many more now who are not willing to make much in the way of sacrifices. One example of this is how unwilling many pastors are to accept positions at small, rural or inner-city churches that show little promise of advancement or higher salaries. Another example is how unproductive many pastors are; outside of very large churches, ministers do not have supervisors in the normal sense, and one of the results can be a lack of industriousness and the opportunity for self-indulgent time wasting. There are greater extremes of this in the ministry than perhaps with any other job, for obvious reasons. If you are an investment banker you may overwork or you may find ways to work moderately, but it is hard to be self-indulgent and undisciplined and remain an investment banker.

This is a tough balance to strike. Many are rightly calling churches to task for how they have taken advantage of ministers (by paying them an inadequate salary, by robbing them of all privacy, by imposing unrealistic expectations on them, etc.) But there are plenty of other pastors today who lack much of a spirit of self-denial at all. The church ministry allows both kinds of persons—so wildly different from each other—to work for years before either their overwork or idleness is discovered.

PASTORAL COWARDICE

Cowardice, one of the more subtle forms of pride, is putting your own needs ahead of the needs of others. Like pride, cowardice reflects a lack of orientation to the gospel and is the temptation to look to the approval of others instead of the work of Christ for your justification and significance. Cowardice is one of the ways a lack of orientation to the gospel keeps us from Christ-like character—in this case, courage. It will be surprising to the new minister how often the office demands courage.

Since a major part of a minister's job is publicly proclaiming the truth of God's word and since the idea of absolute truth has been eroded in the postmodern era, it should come as no surprise that the role of a minister requires courage. As one who has been preaching since 1975, I can say that in the last two generations, the Christian message has become increasingly unpopular to the average American. The concepts of truth, authority, sin, and salvation are seen as outdated and irrelevant. Furthermore, the concepts of judgment, the wrath of God, and the reality of hell are seen as dangerous and extreme. To preach on these things outside of the shrinking enclaves of very traditional or conservative people takes courage.

Even the audience of traditional, conservative people, however, where the majority of evangelical churches exist, requires its own brand of courage. Pastors will often find a great deal of resistance if

7. In 1756, a heavily edited version of George Whitefield's *Journals* and autobiographical accounts was released. An edition published by Banner of Truth in 1960 leaves the deleted passages in. An interesting exercise is to read these, paying attention to the later-deleted sections.

they preach on the specific besetting sins typical of their neighborhoods, such as racism, materialism, hypocrisy, or self-righteousness. Congregants would prefer that the pastor speak about “how bad it is getting in our society—out there.” If you preach to matters closer to home, it will take courage. Pastoral work continually brings up situations in which powerful people in the church need to be lovingly confronted. Leadership of any institution requires continual decision-making, some of which are bound to unsettle or displease some party in the church.

Beware of counterfeit courage. By this I mean that some pastors, while claiming to have “the courage of their convictions,” are actually practicing a false courage that alienates. They seem to relish confrontation. They may even preach on unpopular subjects regularly and with flair. They seldom shrink from telling someone he or she is in the wrong. But many of these pastors have a large “back door” of people who feel abused and who have left the church. When this becomes a regular occurrence, the “courage” may really be a form of pastoral pride, and thus their ministry alienates. True courage, born of the gospel, neither relishes conflict nor avoids it. A person secure in Christ does not need to win arguments or please others for his personal assurance. While it is true that godly courage may result in people complaining or leaving the church, there should not be a steady stream of such people. So if no one ever leaves your church, or conversely if a lot of people do, you are probably lacking in pastoral courage.

PASTORAL HYPOCRISY

Perhaps the greatest dilemma of the pastor—or any Christian leader—is the danger of hypocrisy. By this I mean that, unlike other professionals, we as ministers are expected to proclaim God’s goodness and to provide encouragement at all times. We are always pointing people toward God in one way or another, in order to show them his worth and beauty. That’s the essence of our ministry. But seldom will our hearts be in a condition to say such a thing with complete integrity, since our own hearts are often in need of encouragement, gospel centeredness, and genuine gladness. Thus, we have two choices: either we have to guard our hearts continually in order to practice what we are preaching, or we live bifurcated lives of outward ministry and inward gloominess.

THE MINISTRY WILL MAKE YOU A FAR BETTER
OR A FAR WORSE CHRISTIAN THAN YOU
WOULD HAVE BEEN OTHERWISE.

In this way, the ministry will make you a far better or a far worse Christian than you would have been otherwise. But it will not leave you where you were! And it will put enormous pressure on your integrity and character. The key problem will be preaching the gospel while not believing the gospel. As ministers, we must be willing to admit that ministerial success often becomes the real basis for our joy and significance, much more so than the love and acceptance we have in Jesus Christ. Ministry success often becomes what we look to in order to measure our worth to others and our confidence before God. In other words, we look to ministry success to be for us what only Christ can be. All ministers who know themselves will be fighting this all their lives. It is the reason for jealousy, for comparing ourselves to other ministers, for needing to control people and programs in the church, and for feeling defensive toward criticism. At one level we believe the gospel that we are saved by grace not works, but at a deeper level we don’t believe it much at all. We are still trying to create our own righteousness through spiritual performance, albeit one that is sanctioned by our call to ministry.⁸

8. For a related article, see Timothy Keller, “Ministry Can Be Dangerous to Your Spiritual Health” (2007), gospelinlife.com.

THE PRIORITY OF CHARACTER

What can we conclude from the harrowing ride we have just taken on the spiritual dangers and pitfalls intrinsic to the ordained ministry? It is this. All the causes of either visible or pending failure stem from a failure to cultivate the inner life. Look at the list of the causes of fruitlessness. They are the results of failing to know ourselves, failing to believe the gospel, and forgetting the truth of God's word. Thus, we must cultivate the work of the inner life.

THE PRIORITY OF THE INNER LIFE OVER OUTWARD MINISTRY

It's important to begin by saying that often ministry failures can be traced to a lack of true calling to the ministry—which is a subject for another article. Apart from that foundational flaw, however, most ministry failure stems from a neglect of the inner life and communion with God. Secondary problems, such as a minister's insufficient training or misguided approach, usually do not become full-fledged failures unless they are accompanied with—and thus magnified many times over—by failures of inner life and character. So while it may create problems if a young minister imposes an inappropriate model on a church, it probably won't be disastrous unless he begins to interpret opposition as a threat to his identity of a successful minister, in which case he would respond with insecurity and drive people out needlessly.

THE PRIORITY OF CHARACTER OVER GIFTS

Christian leadership is mobilizing God's gifts to accomplish God's goals in God's way. Leadership involves developing our strengths in order to articulate the vision, persuade people to follow, and keep them all working together. The *main* thing a Christian leader needs above all these, however, is spiritual maturity.

Scottish minister Robert Murray M'Cheyne was reputed to have told other leaders, "The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness." Before his death in 1843, M'Cheyne preached his last sermon on Isaiah 60:1, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." He went home to bed with a fever and died a week later. After his death a letter was found in his bedroom, part of which read:

*"I hope you will pardon a stranger for addressing to you a few lines. I heard you preach last Sabbath evening, and it pleased God to bless that sermon to my soul. It was not so much what you said, as your manner of speaking, that struck me. I saw in you a beauty of holiness that I never saw before. You also said something in your prayer that struck me very much. It was 'Thou knowest that we love Thee.' Oh, sir, what would I give that I could say to my blessed Saviour, 'Thou knowest that I love Thee!'"*⁹

What a wonderful, enduring testimony of what is most needed in a pastor!

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

In 1 Corinthians 13 we see a clear example of the need for Christian character over Christian ministry or giftedness. The church in Corinth was a growing congregation, blessed with abundant gifts in tongues (13:1), prophecy (13:2), teaching, generosity, and social concern (13:3). Yet the remaining verses reveal all the ways in which the Corinthian church was ungodly. They were impatient and proud (13:4), envious, critical, rude, jealous, self-absorbed, and egotistical. Not only did Paul point out these issues as the underlying causes of their problems, he went so far as to say that it was possible to have all of these gifts in a dynamic church and yet be "nothing." Most commentators agree that a literal

9. Robert Murray M'Cheyne, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray McCheyne, Minister of St. Peter's Church* (Dundee, Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1844), 162-163.

interpretation is necessary, that Paul is saying it is possible to do miracles by the power of God and have revelations and not even be a Christian! We see this in the case of Judas the disciple, who evidently did perform miracles but was one who didn't truly know Jesus (Matthew 7:21-22). In other words, it is possible to do ministry through the power of God without any grace in the heart or without knowing his true love that "never fails" (1 Cor. 13:8).

This is also why Jesus said, "By their fruit ye shall know them" rather than "by their *gifts*." Love, joy, peace, and humility cannot grow and flourish when our hearts are far from God; but teaching, evangelism, counseling, and leading *can*. The danger is that we can look to our ministry activity as evidence that God is with us or as a way to earn God's favor. The reference in 1 Corinthians 13 to gongs and cymbals probably refers to pagan worship at the temples of Demeter and Cybele, in which a loud show of noise and commotion was used to attract the favor of the gods. According to Paul, it is possible to do Christian ministry in the same way. If we are remembering the gospel, if we are rejoicing in our justification, then our ministry will be a sacrifice of thanksgiving; the result will be acts done in love, humility, patience, and tenderness. But if our hearts are not solely centered in the saving work of Jesus and if we are not speaking the gospel into our hearts regularly, we will by default seek to control God and to attract his favor with our "clanging cymbals" of service, noted by the telltale signs of impatience, irritability, pride, hurt feelings, jealousy, and boasting (1 Cor. 12-14). We will identify with our ministry and make it an extension of ourselves. We will be driven, scared, and either too timid or too brash. And perhaps, away from the public glare, we may be engaging in secret sins.

CONCLUSION

We must beware of identifying with our ministry and making it an extension of ourselves. Until we see this, we may be successful in the short term but may begin to see the telltale signs of fruitlessness: cowardice, hypocrisy, indulgence. We are clashing our cymbals, and the results are the noise of hurt feelings, a critical spirit, consuming anxiety, and persistent joylessness in our work.

GODLY CHARACTER COVERS THE GAPS IN OUR GIFTEDNESS

There are three basic roles or functions that a Christian minister has—preaching, counseling, and leading. No one is equally gifted in all three areas, and yet we must do them all. So we have gaps in our gifts, areas where we are obligated to work harder to compensate for our lack of giftedness. Most leadership literature teaches us to compensate for our gaps by surrounding ourselves with people who have complementary gifts. That is certainly helpful, if you can pull it off. But there is another, more surefire way to cover the gaps—with godliness. What do I mean? You may be rather ineloquent, but if you are very godly, there will be a wisdom and insight that is attractive to others. You may lack the temperament and skills to be an effective counselor, but if you are very godly, there will be a sympathy and love that shines through and proves effective. You may be very disorganized and not very dynamic in your personality, but if you are very godly, there will be a humility about you that will command people's respect. In other words, your godly character fills in the gaps left by a lack of giftedness. In fact, people who are multi-gifted are at a disadvantage in that people usually think they are more spiritually mature than they really are. This is because it is their talent, not their holiness, that is covering all the bases in their ministry.

GODLY CHARACTER COVERS THE DARK SIDE OF OUR GIFTS

Without deep godliness and character, spiritual gifts can trip us up not only by their absence or weakness, but also by their presence and strength. What do I mean? A pastor with strengths in the prophetic gifts of ministry will tend to be impatient and may not be wise in the diplomacy necessary to get things done. A pastor with strength in the priestly gifts of ministry may be very warm but not very

efficient or organized. A pastor with strengths in the kingly gifts of ministry may be extremely organized but may lack vision or courage to take risks and may be inclined to put goals ahead of people's needs. Again, most of the leadership literature tells us how to handle any gift-deficient areas. But it almost never warns about the gift-rich areas. Gifts without compensatory godliness will lead to blind spots and blunders.

As we have seen, engaging in Christian ministry will make you a much better person or a much worse person than you would have been otherwise. You will not remain static; you will be growing and changing. And thus, the question of "How am I doing?" does not have to be a pestering plumb line but can serve as a personal reminder to pursue godliness, cultivate fruitfulness, work diligently, trust completely, and preach confidently.

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