

FROM THE STUDYJUNE 8, 2015OCTOBER 30, 2017DEREK J. BROWNMINISTRY

Ministry as a Means of Perseverance

I was a college sophomore when I trusted in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of my sins. The spiritual joy that characterized much of my first few months as a new believer, however, would eventually face significant obstacles. One obstacle in particular that threatened to throw me completely off course was the sad yet steady reality of Christian defection.

As a young believer I had no categories for understanding how someone who appeared to be a solid Christian could turn away from Christ into outright doctrinal error and flagrant sin. I even found myself wondering regularly whether my faith was genuine. If these professing Christians appeared to be true believers, I reasoned, whose to say that I won't follow the same pattern?

A Call to Ministry

To this day I still believe that my conversion at age 19 was followed immediately by a call to ministry. If you and I were to retrace my pre-conversion steps, I could show you times before I trusted Christ when I found myself considering pastoral ministry as a legitimate career path. Working mysteriously, God was planting desires for service to him in my heart even before he would draw me to his Son for salvation.

After my conversion and soon in to the second semester of my sophomore year of college, I decided to transfer schools. The desire to study Scripture for the sake of knowing the truth and preaching the truth was steadily growing, and I could think of nothing I rather pursue as my life's work than pastoral ministry. I matriculated at The Master's College (TMC) in Fall of 1999.

It was in the first few months of my time at TMC that started to notice that professing Christians—even those who appeared mature, passionate about the gospel, and committed to the truth—could defect from the faith and give themselves over to theological error, sinful lifestyles, even rejecting Christ altogether. I heard and read stories about such defections, and even experienced several among a few of my own friends while at school. Was there any hope for me?

My struggle to reconcile this disturbing reality with what I knew about the security of the believer coincided with what, at the time, appeared to be little more than an interesting piece of autobiography from my president and pastor John MacArthur. While preaching in chapel one week, MacArthur stated—merely in passing—that perhaps one reason that he had been placed in ministry was that he required a large amount of time in the Scripture each week in order to keep from falling away. This small and seemingly inconsequential statement, however, would lodge itself firmly in my heart and remain with me for years to come as I would consider the role ministry would play in my perseverance.

Ministry and Stability

After I graduated college I took a job as a youth pastor in the San Francisco Bay Area. During this time I had the privilege of teaching and discipling junior high and high school students while receiving excellent training from my supervising pastor. I also found that as I spent time regularly in the Scriptures and sought to pursue a life of fruitful ministry, my faith started to stabilize and my fear of falling away began to subside.

But a couple years into my youth ministry post, my fears were again rekindled, this time by an article entitled “The Almost Inevitable Ruin of Every Minister and How to Avoid It,” by Don Whitney, professor of Christian Spirituality at Southern Seminary. In this sobering and poignant piece, Whitney noted that according to recent statistics, for every twenty men who enter the ministry, only one of them will still be in the ministry by age 65. In order to help ministers maintain their course, Whitney offers several points of advice. According to Whitney, pastors will remain in the ministry as they make progress in the ministry. In order to make progress, pastors must remain close to Jesus, keep themselves in Scripture and prayer, and commit to constant learning. Useful principles all, and I heartily recommend this article to pastors or aspiring ministers.

Ministry as a Means of Perseverance

But there is a slight emphasis that I would like to add alongside Whitney’s exhortations. Rather than approaching ministry *only* as a potential minefield of failure through which we must successfully navigate, might we not encourage pastors to also view ministry as a *means of their perseverance*? Similar to MacArthur’s side-comment about his personal need to be often in the Bible, could we not say that in his wisdom God may place men in the ministry, not only because it’s good for others, but because *it’s good for the pastor*?

Granted, there are those in ministry today who probably shouldn’t be there (see [James 3:1](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+3%3A1&version=ESV) (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James+3%3A1&version=ESV>)), and I recognize that there are far too many stories of pastors who have walked away from the church, from their families, and from Jesus. Yes, those of us who aspire to be or who are already in the ministry would do well to carefully evaluate our so-called “call” to the ministry and take time to learn from these cautionary tales.

Yet, I have become convinced that warnings and cautionary tales are not enough. I am grateful for the positive exhortations of men like Whitney who counsel us from years of pastoral wisdom and spiritual insight. I appreciate the many articles that prompt to weigh the seriousness and count the cost of pastoral ministry. But there is also a need to re-calibrate our approach to ministry and its relation to our perseverance. Rather than viewing pastoral work as an obstacle to our perseverance that must be overcome, might we not see it as the very thing that God will use to keep us in the faith? Indeed, is this not how the apostle Paul understood ministry in his counsel to Timothy?

Paul and Perseverance

In the first letter to his young apprentice, Paul follows a sobering prediction of future apostasy (1 Timothy 4:1-5) with several exhortations intended to help Timothy understand his varied responsibilities as a shepherd. He is to teach the church (4:6, 11), avoid needless controversy (4:7a), discipline himself for the sake of godliness (4:7b), set an example of mature Christian faith despite his age (4:12), devote himself to reading and teaching Scripture (4:13) and diligently use his spiritual gift (4:14). In fact, Timothy was not only to practice these things, but consume himself with them so that the church could see his spiritual and ministerial progress.

Paul follows these exhortations with another bit of instruction. Timothy must keep a careful watch on his life and on the teaching (v.16). If he persists in guarding his personal conduct and the doctrine he delivers to his hearers, he will ensure his own final salvation and the final salvation of the people under his care.

Because I am unable to get into a detailed defense of Calvinism in this essay, let me just lay my cards on the table. I believe that salvation is wholly from the Lord, from unconditional election to justification to final glorification. Those who are genuinely saved will persevere in faith to the end. But consistent Calvinism also asserts that God uses means to keep his people in the faith; means like the warnings and

encouragements of Scripture, the ministry of the local church, events of Providence, and the friendship of Christian brothers and sisters. Timothy is already saved, and he will be saved in the end by attending to the means God has provided for him (for an exhaustive defense of this view of perseverance with regard to the warnings in Scripture, see Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Assurance and Perseverance* (<http://www.amazon.com/The-Race-Set-Before-Perseverance/dp/0830815554>)).

In the case of Paul's exhortations to the young pastor in Ephesus, it appears that pastoral ministry is one of the means by which Timothy will persevere in the faith. By persisting in his ministry responsibilities—tasks that required careful attention to his own life and what he was teaching—Timothy would assure his final salvation. In other words, instead of viewing his duties merely as stones paving the way to a potential downfall, Paul intended that Timothy view the very work of the ministry as the fuel that would keep the engine of faith humming (mixed, anachronistic metaphor acknowledged).

Slight Adjustment, Significant Change

Although the point I am making may appear slight, I believe that an adjustment here in how we approach pastoral work may have a powerful effect on the lives and ministries of many shepherds. As we see ministry as a gift from God to enable us to persevere in the faith, many of us may find greater confidence with which to carry out our work. We may find our teaching attended with greater power, our discipline sought with greater rigor, and our spiritual lives characterized by greater joy. Instead of worrying about unavoidable failure, we will grab hold of our pastoral responsibilities as our God-given means of persevering to the end. And, as Paul notes, our progress will not only benefit us, it will serve as a means of perseverance for those we lead.

Photo: Guiseppe Milo

TAGGED PASTORAL MINISTRY, PERSEVERANCE

5 thoughts on “Ministry as a Means of Perseverance”

1. Andrew K says:

JUNE 8, 2015 AT 2:43 PM

DB, thx for posting this wise reflection. I too remember that side-comment from MacArthur in chapel and have thought of it often over the years. Your post stirred two thoughts: First, it seems like 2 Corinthians 4.1 (ministry as mercy from God) is apropos to your reflections here. Second, I think your point about vocation being an aspect of perseverance is strong and I wonder if it can possibly be generalized to all ‘vocations’ – for example, marriage or singleness could be seen in this light. - andrew k

REPLY

Derek J. Brown says:

JUNE 11, 2015 AT 6:33 PM

Drew,

I appreciate your comments, and yes, great insight on 2 Cor 4:1! I think you are probably right about other vocations as well. As I think about singleness, for example, Paul sees this calling as a way a person can secure undistracted devotion to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:35). Certainly that statement can be understood in light of Paul's larger theology of perseverance. Same with marriage, for it

enables us to avoid sexual sin, it serves as a means of sanctification, and can even provide a certain kind of spiritual stability as we learn how to love and provide for another. Great thoughts, brother!

Derek

REPLY

2. **VaSanganyado** says:

JUNE 9, 2015 AT 8:35 AM

Pastoral ministry like most vocations require perseverance, an attribute that can be cultivated through a careful look at the cross. Familiarity and plain apathy often contribute to the common downfall or spiritual sidetracking of many believers, especially pastors.

I have found one of the main reason is what Francis Schaefer called 'the problem of reality'. Pastors are daily confronted with apparent incongruity between scriptures and their personal life. Like you said, this apparent disagreement stems from a lack of study, or devotion to the Bible and its authority.

REPLY

3. **Blake Gillen** says:

JULY 9, 2015 AT 9:29 AM

Good word, Derek. Thanks!

REPLY

Derek J. Brown says:

JULY 17, 2015 AT 3:43 PM

Blake,

How long has it been? 15 years? Anyway, thanks for commenting! I am glad the article was helpful to you.

Derek

REPLY

