

DANGEROUS CALLING

**CONFRONTING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF
PASTORAL MINISTRY**

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 **CROSSWAY®**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design and illustration: David Fassett

First printing 2012

Reprinted in paperback 2015

Reprinted with new cover and study questions 2025

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9922-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9924-8

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9923-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tripp, Paul David, 1950-

Dangerous calling : confronting the unique challenges of
pastoral ministry / Paul David Tripp.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3582-6 (hc)

1. Pastoral theology. I. Title.

BV4011.3. T75 2012

253—dc23

2012015795

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

LB 35 34 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25
13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER SEVEN

WAR ZONES

I guess it was the class I never took in seminary, but I had no concept of the battles I would face in ministry. Sure, I knew there would be battles for the gospel or battles for a biblical philosophy of ministry. I knew there would be skirmishes with fellow leaders or tugs of war between competing ministry interests. I knew that there would be an inevitable ebb and flow of ministry, that we would go through both bright and dark passages. I knew that people don't always hunger for or treasure the gospel of Jesus Christ as they should. I knew that not everyone to whom I was called to minister would have a natural affection for or connection to me. I knew I would be compared to the pastors who had preceded me. I knew that I would be called to minister in moments of meager resources of both help and money. I knew I would be called to battle for the gospel in people's lives in very hard moments. I knew that there would be times when people were angry with God and therefore not all that excited with me. I knew all of that, but what I didn't know or anticipate were the battles that would rage inside of me, battles that are unique to or intensified by pastoral ministry.

It's this inner war that I want to introduce in this chapter and that will make up the content of the rest of the book. As a pastor, you'd better be ready to fight for the gospel, but you'd better also be ready to war for your own soul. You'd better be committed to being honest about the battles that are going on in your own heart. You'd better be prepared to preach the gospel to yourself. You'd better arm yourself for the inner conflict that greets anyone in ministry.

MINISTRY IS WAR

Why do so many pastors report being overburdened and overstressed? Why do so many pastors report tension between family life and

ministry life? Why does pastoral ministry often seem more of a trial than a joy? Why is there often disharmony between the private life of the pastor and his public ministry persona? Why are there often dysfunctional relationships between the pastor and his ministry leaders or staff? Why is the ministry life of many pastors shockingly short?

Perhaps we have forgotten that pastoral ministry is war and that you will never live successfully in the pastorate if you live with a peacetime mentality. Permit me to explain. The fundamental battle of pastoral ministry is not with the shifting values of the surrounding culture. It is not the struggle with resistant people who don't seem to esteem the gospel. It is not the fight for the success of the ministries of the church. And it is not the constant struggle of resources and personnel to accomplish the mission. No, the war of the pastorate is a deeply personal war. It is fought on the ground of the pastor's heart. It is a war of values, allegiances, and motivations. It is about subtle desires and foundational dreams. This war is the greatest threat to every pastor. Yet it is a war that we often naively ignore or quickly forget in the busyness of local-church ministry.

THE WAR FOR YOUR HEART

First, pastoral ministry is always shaped by a war between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God, which is fought on the field of your heart. The reason this war is so dangerous and deceptive is that you build both kingdoms in ministry by doing ministry! Perhaps some theological background would be helpful here. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:15 that Jesus came so that those who live would no longer "live for themselves." Paul is arguing something significant here, something that every pastor should remember. He is arguing that the DNA of sin is selfishness. Sin inserts me into the middle of my universe, the one place reserved for God and God alone. Sin reduces my field of concern down to my wants, my needs, and my feelings. Sin really does make it all about me.

Because the inertia of sin leads away from God's purpose and glory toward my purpose and glory, as long as sin is inside of me there will be temptation to exchange God's glory for my own. In ways that are subtle and not so subtle, I begin to pursue the accoutrements of human

glory. Things like appreciation, reputation, success, power, comfort, and control become all too important. Because they are too important to me, they begin to shape the way I think about ministry, the things I want out of my ministry, and the things I do in ministry. Remember, a pastor's ministry is not shaped just by his knowledge, gifts, skill, and experience but also by the condition of his heart. Could it be that much of the tension and despondency that pastors experience is the result of seeking to get things out of ministry that we should not be seeking?

WAR FOR THE GOSPEL

This leads us to a second battleground in the war that is pastoral ministry: the war for the gospel. Not only should we actively battle for the gospel as the fundamental paradigm for every ministry of the church, but we must also fight for the gospel to be the resting place of our hearts. Pastor, no one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one else talks to you more. The things you say to yourself about God, you, ministry, and others are profoundly important, shaping your participation in and experience of ministry. My experience with hundreds of pastors is that many sadly function in a regular state of *gospel amnesia*. They forget to preach privately to themselves the gospel that they declare publicly to others.

When you forget the gospel, you begin to seek from the situations, locations, and relationships of ministry what you have already been given in Christ. You begin to look to ministry for identity, security, hope, well-being, meaning, and purpose. These are things you will only ever find vertically. They are already yours in Christ. So you have to fight to give the gospel presence in your heart. Also, when you live out of the grace of the gospel, you quit fearing failure, you quit avoiding being known, and you quit hiding your struggles and your sin. The gospel declares that there is nothing that could ever be uncovered about you and me that hasn't already been covered by the grace of Jesus. The gospel is the only thing that can free a pastor from the guilt, shame, and drivenness of the *hide* ("never let your weakness show") and *seek* (asking ministry to do what Christ has already done) lifestyle that makes ministry burdensome to so many pastors.

So, in the war of pastoral ministry, are you a good soldier? Remember that the Holy Spirit lives inside of you, and he battles on your behalf even when you don't have the sense to. Remember too that in Christ you have already been given everything you need to be what you're supposed to be and to do what you're supposed to do in the place where God has positioned you. And remember that since Emmanuel is with you, it is impossible to ever be alone in the moment-by-moment war that is pastoral ministry.

TWO COMPETING KINGDOMS

It took God's employing pastoral hardship to get me to embrace the inescapable reality that everything I did in ministry was done in allegiance to and in pursuit of either the kingdom of self or the kingdom of God. This truth is best exegeted for us in Matthew 6:19-34. (Please grab your Bible and read the passage). I'm convinced that this passage is an elaborate unpacking of the thoughts, desires, and actions of the kingdom of self. Notice the turn in the passage in verse 33, where Jesus says, "But seek first the kingdom of God." The word "But" tells us this verse is the transition point of the passage. Everything before it explains the operation of another kingdom, the kingdom of self. This makes the passage a very helpful lens on the struggle between these two kingdoms that somehow, some way, battle in the heart of everyone in ministry.

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The encroachment of the kingdom of self in ministry is really a matter of *shifting treasure*. Called to have everything I say and do ruled by the Christ-centered, grace-driven treasures of heaven, instead my ministry begins to be shaped by a catalog of earthbound treasures. My ministry begins to be shaped by subtle but formative shifts in the kind of treasure that rules my heart and, therefore, shapes my words and behavior. When things begin to control the thoughts and desires of my heart, they rise way beyond their true importance, and in so doing they shape the way I do ministry. Let me suggest just five of a long list of pos-sible treasure shifts that can easily take place in the heart of any pastor.

1) IDENTITY: MOVING FROM IDENTITY IN CHRIST TO IDENTITY IN MINISTRY

In pastoral ministry, it is very tempting to look horizontally for what you have already been given in Christ. It is possible to be a pastor and

a functional identity amnesiac. When I am, I begin to need my worth, inner sense of well-being, meaning, and purpose affirmed by the people and programs of the church. Rather than the hope and courage that come from resting in my identity in Christ, my ministry becomes captured and shaped by the treasure of a series of temporary horizontal affirmations of my value and worth. This robs me of ministry boldness and makes me all too focused on how those in the circle of my ministry are responding to me.

2) MATURITY: DEFINING SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING NOT BY THE MIRROR OF THE WORD BUT BY MINISTRY

Biblical literacy is not to be confused with Christian maturity. Homiletic accuracy is not the same as godliness. Theological dexterity is very different from practical holiness. Successful leadership is not the same as a heart for Christ. Growth in influence must not be confused with growth in grace. It is tempting to allow a shift to take place in the way that I evaluate my maturity as a pastor. Rather than living with a deep neediness for the continued operation of grace in my own heart, I begin, because of experience and success in ministry, to view myself as being more mature than I actually am. Because of these feelings of arrival, I don't sit under my own preaching; I don't preach out of a winsome, tender, and humble heart; and I don't seek out the ministry of the body of Christ. This allows my preparation to be less devotional and my view of others to be more judgmental.

3) REPUTATION: SHIFTING FROM A MINISTRY SHAPED BY ZEAL FOR THE REPUTATION OF CHRIST TO A MINISTRY SHAPED BY HUNGER FOR THE PRAISE OF PEOPLE

My ministry should be functionally motivated by the glory of Christ, that his fame would be known by more and more people, and that together we would all know practically what it means to submit to his lordship. Instead, my ministry becomes seduced by the treasure of my own reputation. My heart begins to be captured by the desire to be esteemed by others, the buzz of being needed, the allure of standing

out in the crowd, the glory of being in charge, and the power of being right. This makes it hard to admit I am wrong, to submit to the counsel of others, to surrender control, to not have to win the day and prove I am right. It makes it hard to accept blame or to share credit, and it makes me less than excited about ministry as a body-of-Christ collaborative process.

4) ESSENTIALITY: MOVING FROM REST IN
THE ESSENTIAL PRESENCE OF JESUS THE
MESSIAH TO SEEING ONESELF AS WAY TOO
ESSENTIAL TO WHAT GOD IS DOING

Where once I viewed myself as one of many tools in God's kingdom toolbox, I now begin to see myself as too central, too important to what God is doing in my local setting. Rather than resting in the person and work of the Messiah, I begin to load the burden of the individual and collective growth of God's people onto my own shoulders. This causes me to devalue the importance of the gifts and ministry of others and tempts me to assign to myself more than I am able to do. In ways that I probably am not aware of, I've begun to try to be the Messiah instead of resting in my identity as a tool in his faithful and powerful hands.

5) CONFIDENCE: SHIFTING AWAY FROM A
HUMBLE CONFIDENCE IN TRANSFORMING
GRACE TO OVERCONFIDENCE IN ONE'S
OWN EXPERIENCE AND GIFTS

Longevity and success in ministry are good things, but they can also be dangerous things for the heart of a pastor. We are all capable of becoming all too confident in ourselves. A confidence shift begins to take place from the treasure of humble confidence in the power of rescuing, forgiving, transforming, and delivering grace, to rest in my own knowledge, abilities, gifts, and experience. Because of this, I don't grieve enough, I don't pray enough, I don't prepare enough, I don't confess enough, and I don't listen to others enough. I have begun to assign to myself capabilities I don't have, and because I do,

I don't minister out of my own sense of need for Christ's grace, and I don't seek out the help of others.



In each area it is tempting for my ministry to be shaped by a shift from confidence in the treasure of the relentless grace of Jesus, the redeemer, to hope in earthbound treasures, which he reminds us (Matt. 6:19–34) are temporary by nature and have no capacity to deliver what we are seeking. Could it be that these treasure shifts lead to so many of the familiar institutional problems and relational breakdowns in ministry? Could it be that these shifts are what cause ministry to become a burden rather than the joy that it actually is? Your ministry will live at the dangerous intersection between the difficulties and temptations of this fallen world and the kingdom battle that is still going on in your heart. This crucial intersection will be the focus of the rest of this book.

The treasures of the kingdom of self become all the more seductive and powerful when I, as pastor, lose sight of the glories of what I've been given in Christ. When I do this, I begin to think of myself as poor when grace has made me rich, and I seek riches in places where they simply cannot be found. But I need not run away in shame or give way to panic, because the grace of the cross has covered this struggle as well and will work again today to rescue me from me.

WHAT TO REMEMBER

In the face of all of this, what are the things that we must remember? Let's approach the question this way. The experts say that there are only three things to consider when buying a piece of property: location, location, location. The same could be said about life. When you understand location, you live and minister in a radically different way. Confused? Let me point you to four ways in which location matters.

1) YOU LIVE IN A DRAMATICALLY FALLEN WORLD.

You have to be prepared. You have to live with realistic expectations. You simply must bring a biblical understanding to the place where

you now live and minister, or you will be constantly unprepared and disappointed. You and I live in a very broken world where there is trouble on every side. Your body and mind are affected by the fall and don't always work as they should. Your family and friendships will not work as they were designed. The government over you does not function as it was created to function. The church you serve is filled with flawed people yet in need of redemption. The broken physical environment suffers under the weight of the fall. The apostle Paul says it very well in Romans 8: "The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (vv. 22–24).

There's no escaping it: you are located in a place where trouble of some kind will greet you every day. Much of that trouble will live inside you. You live and minister in a place where somehow, some way, temptation will greet you every day. When you face this harsh reality, you will live prepared for the troubles that come your way.

2) THE BIG BATTLE IS FOUGHT IN YOUR HEART.

In acknowledging the brokenness of the world where you live and minister, you do not want to give way to spiritual environmentalism in which you blame all of your struggles on things outside of you. That was the mistake of the medieval monastery, walled communities separated from the evil world and intended to foster righteous living. As it turned out, these communities tended to repeat all the ills of the surrounding world from which they had separated.

Monasteries were a failure because they neglected one very significant biblical truth: the biggest danger to every human being, even those in ministry, is located inside of him, not outside of him. There is something dark and deceitful that still lurks in the heart of every one of God's children who has not yet been fully glorified: sin. It is only ever the sin inside of you that draws and hooks you to the sin outside of you. Every day there is a war fought for control of your heart. But your jealous Savior, with the zeal of gorgeous redemptive love, will

not share your heart. He will not rest until your heart is ruled by him and him alone.

3) YOU WILL RUN SOMEWHERE FOR REFUGE.

In the middle of trouble, when you are in the heat of the battle, you will run somewhere for refuge. You will run somewhere for rest, comfort, peace, encouragement, wisdom, healing, and strength. There is only one place to run where true protection, rest, and strength can be found. You and I must learn, in life and ministry, to make the Lord our refuge.

Perhaps in trouble you run to other people, hoping that they can be your personal messiah. Perhaps you run to entertainment, hoping to numb your troubles away. Maybe you run to a substance, trying your best to turn off the pain. Maybe you are tempted to run to food or sex, fighting pain with pleasure. Since none of these things can provide the refuge that you seek, putting your hope there tends only to add disappointment to the trouble you're already experiencing.

God really is your refuge and strength. Only he rules every location where your trouble exists. Only he controls all the relationships in which disappointment will rear its head. Only he has the power to rescue and deliver you. Only he has the grace you need to face what you are facing. Only he holds the wisdom that, in trouble, you so desperately need. Only he is in, with, and for you at all times. He is the refuge of refuges. Do you run to him?

4) WHERE YOU ARE HEADING, TROUBLE WILL BE NO MORE.

You could argue that the biblical story is about three locations. The garden in Genesis was a location of perfection and beauty but became a place of sin and trouble. The hill of Calvary was a place of both horrible suffering and transforming grace. And the New Jerusalem, that place of peace and refuge lit by the brightness of the Son, will be our final refuge forever. Because of the cross of Jesus Christ, your story will not end with daily trouble and temporary refuge. No, your final location will be utterly unlike anything you have ever experienced, even on your

best and brightest ministry day. You are headed for the New Jerusalem, where the final tear will be dried and trouble will be no more.



Today, in life and ministry, you will face trouble of some kind. Today you will run somewhere for refuge. Today there is hope and help to be found. May God be your refuge, and as you run to him, may you remember that he has promised you that there will be a day when your trouble is no more. But you live between the already and the not yet, and the battle still rages. The question for you, pastor, is, are you an aware, wise, and prepared soldier who runs again and again to the Captain of your soul for rescuing, forgiving, transforming, empowering, and delivering grace?

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