

Dear Timothy

Letters on Pastoral Ministry

Revised Edition

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Edited by Thomas K. Ascol



Founders Press

Cape Coral, Florida



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Dedication

To
The members of Grace Baptist Church,
Cape Coral, Florida

And
In Memory of

Pastor Ernest Reisinger (1919–2004)
Pastor Bruce Steward (1936–2006)

Contents

Contributors	9
Preface to the 2016 Edition	19
Preface to the 2004 Edition	21

Chapters

1. Establish Your Priorities	27
<i>Tom Ascol</i>	
2. Watch Your Life	41
<i>Conrad Mbewe</i>	
3. Love Your Family	57
<i>Tedd Tripp</i>	
4. Love Your Flock	71
<i>Ted Christman</i>	
5. Memorize Scripture	87
<i>Andy Davis</i>	
6. Pray Always	101
<i>Martin Holdt</i>	
7. Cultivate Humility	117
<i>C. J. Mahaney</i>	
8. Be Courageous	137
<i>Bill Ascol</i>	
9. Do the Work of an Evangelist	155
<i>Mark Dever</i>	

10.	Do Personal Work	165
	<i>Fred Malone</i>	
11.	Watch Your Doctrine	177
	<i>Raymond Perron</i>	
12.	Keep Studying	189
	<i>Ligon Duncan</i>	
13.	Learn from the Puritans (Part 1)	211
	<i>Joel Beeke</i>	
14.	Learn from the Puritans (Part 2)	237
	<i>Joel Beeke</i>	
15.	Preach the Word	259
	<i>Roger Ellsworth</i>	
16.	Worship in Spirit and in Truth	273
	<i>Terry Johnson</i>	
17.	Train Other Men	291
	<i>Steve Martin</i>	
18.	Care for the Nations	315
	<i>Phil Newton</i>	
19.	Don't Neglect Revival	331
	<i>Ray Ortlund, Jr.</i>	
20.	Find a Place to Settle	343
	<i>Geoff Thomas</i>	
	Recommended Reading	359

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Dr. Conrad Mbewe worked as a mining engineer before answering God's call to pastor Kabwata Baptist Church in Lusaka, Zambia in 1987. The following year he married Felistas and God blessed them with six children (three via adoption). Conrad has a PhD in missions and is the author of over thirty books on the Christian life, including *Foundations for the Flock*. He has been a columnist with a weekly national newspaper since 1992 and is the editor of *Reformation Zambia* magazine. He is the chancellor of the African Christian University and the principal of the Lusaka Ministerial College.

Phil Newton

Phil A. Newton planted the South Woods Baptist Church in Memphis in 1987 and continues to serve as senior pastor. He previously served churches in Alabama and Mississippi. He graduated from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (MDiv), Fuller Theological Seminary (DMin), and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (PhD). He is the author of *Elders in the Life of the Church* (with Matt Schmucker), *Conduct Gospel-Centered Funerals* (with Brian Croft), and the forthcoming, *Mentoring Church*. Phil serves on the executive board of Founders Ministries. He enjoys regular involvement in global missions and mentoring future pastors and missionaries. Phil and his wife Karen have five children and six grandchildren.

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Dr. Ray Ortlund, Jr. was ordained to gospel ministry by Lake Avenue Congregational Church, Pasadena, California, in 1975. He received a BA from Wheaton College, ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary, MA from The University of California, Berkeley, and PhD from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Pastor Ortlund served as Associate Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, from 1989-1998. In addition to a number of essays and articles, he has published several books. Ray also participated in The New Living Translation and the English Standard Version of the Bible. He contributed the introduction and study notes to the book of Isaiah in The ESV Study Bible. Dr. Ortlund is

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Dr. Raymond Perron was born in the Province of Quebec, Canada. He holds an MDiv from Toronto Baptist Seminary and a PhD in Theology from University Laval. Raymond is currently a national missionary with the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America. He started a church (Église réformée baptiste de la Capitale) in Quebec City in 1988 where he is still pastor. He also started a “log college” in Quebec City to train men to be pastors and church planters. Raymond and his wife Diane have one son.

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Geoff Thomas has been pastor of Alfred Place Baptist Church in Aberystwyth, Wales since 1965. He received his BA from Cardiff University in Wales in 1961 and his MDiv from Westminster Seminary in 1964. He is well known as a conference speaker and is the author of *Ernest C. Reisinger, A Biography* (Banner of Truth) as well as other books. He served as an associate editor of *Evangelical Times* for 10 years. He is also an associate editor of the *Banner of Truth* magazine and is responsible for the Banner of Truth website. Geoff and his wife Iola have three daughters.

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Preface

To the 2016 Edition

Dear Timothy was first published in 2004 with the contributions of nineteen pastors whose combined experience totaled more than 480 years. Today, with this new edition of the book, all but one of the contributors are still faithfully serving Christ in His earthly kingdom. The other, Martin Holdt of South Africa, is serving Christ face-to-face as he awaits the resurrection of his body.

Today, the pastoral experience of the contributors amounts to nearly 700 years. I am grateful that Founders Press is reissuing this book for a new generation of pastors and pastoral candidates. The topics addressed are of perennial importance to those called to shepherd the flock of God. The biblical wisdom shared is timeless.

It is encouraging to see the widespread seriousness among the rising generation of men being called by God to serve as pastors. To serve well in these challenging days will require a spiritual gravitas that has, sadly, not always been associated with pastoral ministry. Yet when heaven and hell

are in view and the state of undying souls is at stake, nothing less than wholehearted engagement in the work will suffice.

May the Lord be pleased to use this new edition of *Dear Timothy* to encourage men whom He has placed in the vital work of pastoring churches. And may blessing and power come to those churches through the ministry of the Word, so that the gospel might be spread to the ends of the earth for the glory of our great God.

Tom Ascol
Cape Coral, Florida

Preface

To the 2004 Edition

I thought it was a cruel joke. It felt like I was caught up in some cosmic plot to ruin my happiness and punish my harsh attitudes toward pastors. As a child of the church I had seen my share of pastors come and go in my brief sixteen years. It had become easy for me to judge them unfairly, exaggerating their faults, ignoring their sacrifices and pretending that somehow I would always be immune to their shortcomings.

But there I was, late at night, lying on my bed with this sinking feeling that God was calling me to be a pastor. Not even out of high school and already my life was ruined! Or so I thought. Over the next five years, as God confirmed this inner call through the guidance and affirmation of the church, I found my dilemma steadily increasing. Here I was, very cynical about pastoral ministry but convinced that God was directing my life into that very vocation. I started investigating employment opportunities in social work, thinking that this line of work might satisfy that sense of inner compulsion to enter the ministry.

While considering a job to work with troubled youth, I received a call to become the pastor of Rock Prairie Baptist Church in College Station, Texas. After two weeks of emotional and spiritual turmoil, I accepted their call. The date was October 31, 1978 and it marked for me the beginning of a personal reformation of my attitudes toward pastors and pastoral ministry. It did not take long for me to realize how sinfully judgmental I had been. If that church had judged me with the same measure I had been using, I would not have lasted two months. Instead, they were patient, kind and gentle with me. They allowed me to make mistakes while I was growing into the role of pastor. By God's grace they were very longsuffering as they endured my many foibles. For that reason, I will always have a special place in my heart for that congregation.

As I look back over my early pastoral mishaps I realize that many of them could have been avoided had I received and heeded good counsel. While it is true that all the guidance a pastor needs in order to be equipped "for every good work" is sufficiently found in Scripture, there is no denying the value of godly, experienced counsel. God gives teachers to the church and even those who are called to shepherd His flock need them. As Louis McBurney so wonderfully put it in the title of his 1977 book, every pastor needs a pastor.¹

Think of the influence of Barnabas on Paul. When everyone else was skeptical (if not scared) of the former persecutor, Barnabas took him under his wing, introduced him to church leaders and helped him get started in the work of the ministry (Acts 9:26–30; 11:25–26). The man who was to become our Lord's foremost apostle was greatly blessed to

¹ *Every Pastor Needs a Pastor* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1977).

have such an experienced minister counsel him early in his ministry.

It is a lesson Paul never forgot as he in turn invested part of his life in pastors who would serve the generations following his own. A significant portion of this investment took the form of letters. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus serve as divinely inspired manuals of pastoral ministry. Though Paul undoubtedly gave himself in personal ministry to these men, it is the preservation of his letters to them that has served the church so well throughout history.

Letter writing is a dying art. In our age of email and instant messaging fewer and fewer people seem to have the patience or disposition to compose thoughtful, significant letters. Yet, such correspondence has been a blessing to Christians of every generation. God saw fit to write a significant portion of the New Testament in the form of letters. In addition, think of how much poorer the church would be without the letters of the great Scottish Covenanter, Samuel Rutherford, which Spurgeon called, "the nearest thing to inspiration which can be found in all the writings of mere men."

The converted slave-trader, John Newton, author of such notable hymns as "Amazing Grace" and "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," regarded letter writing to be a great part of his ministerial calling. "It is the Lord's will," he noted, "that I should do most by my letters." Through the republication of those letters, his work continues to this day.²

So, while telephones and the Internet have significantly changed the way we typically communicate today, I believe

² See *The Works of John Newton* (reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), vol. 1.

that well written letters can still offer encouragement and counsel in a helpful and lasting form. The volume you now hold in your hands is an effort to prove that belief. This is a book of letters. They are written from experienced, active pastors to a young, inexperienced pastor.

“Timothy” is a composite character. He is twenty-six years old, has recently graduated from seminary and has been in his first church for six months. He and his wife, Mary, have been married for four years and they have a two-year-old son with another child on the way. Each pastor was asked to offer counsel to him on the basis of a long-term relationship and sincere interest in seeing him make a good start.

The twenty chapters that follow reflect the collective wisdom of more than 480 years of pastoral experience. Each contributor is, at the time of writing, serving a local church. Pastoral ministry is their calling. Their contributions have been made in and around the regular preaching, teaching, counseling and leadership demands that go with pastoring a local church. This fact lends credibility to what they have written.

While the letters are aimed specifically at young pastors the counsel they contain applies to ministers of all ages and, for most of the chapters, to any serious Christian. The themes addressed are not geared to denominational distinctives and the contributors come from a variety of confessional and cultural backgrounds. My prayer is that Christian ministers will be encouraged to greater faithfulness by this volume.

Acknowledgements

Ken Puls and Barb Reisinger have been very involved in organizing and managing the details of publication. Their patience, suggestions and professionalism have made the book

much better than it would have been otherwise. Amy Arens, who now is the wife of her husband and pastor, Jason, asked me to contribute to a collection of letters of encouragement that she presented to him on their wedding day five years ago when he was still a seminary student. That planted the seed in my mind for a book like this. As ever, my wonderful wife, Donna, has encouraged me in countless ways through the long process of getting the idea for this book finally into print.

For the last eighteen years it has been my joy and privilege to serve some of the most longsuffering and gracious people on earth in Grace Baptist Church. Their love for me has nurtured my own love for other pastors. I find myself today with an attitude that is exactly opposite of that which I harbored twenty-five years ago. I am amazed that God would grant me the privilege to serve a local church as a pastor. Those pastors who have served their generation and finished well are my heroes. The ones who are joyfully persevering in the work are my examples and encourage me to do the same. And those who are just starting out in the ministry stir up my hope for the future.

John Newton called the minister's work "a sorrow full of joy." So I have found it to be. Sometimes the sorrows are exacerbated by the sense of loneliness that often accompanies a pastor. Many pastors do not have a Paul or Barnabas to help them navigate those times and help them gain a fresh sight of the joys of the ministry. I hope that this book will provide many signposts that direct spiritual shepherds to paths of pastoral joy.

God placed in the congregation of Grace Baptist Church two retired pastors who have been a source of blessing to me on countless occasions. Their counsel, encouragement and support have strengthened my hand through many difficult

seasons. To Ernie Reisinger and Bruce Steward, along with the members of Grace, this book is lovingly dedicated.

Tom Ascol
Grace Baptist Church
Cape Coral, Florida

Reformation Day, 2003

1

Establish Priorities

Tom Ascol

Dear Timothy,

Donna and I are very excited for you and Mary as you settle into your new pastorate. It is an awesome responsibility and privilege to care for the souls of God's people. After twenty-five years in this ministry, I still tremble at the greatness of the task. I hope you won't think it presumptuous if I offer you a little "seasoned counsel" from one pastor to another.

One of the greatest ongoing challenges I face in my life as a pastor is maintaining a proper balance in my priorities. Every pastor has several roles that he must fulfill in order to remain faithful to his calling. You must be a student of God's Word. You must be a man of prayer. You must give leadership to the church. You must work hard to preach and teach the Word so that the people under your care are continually being formed by it into the image of Christ. You must do the work of an evangelist and you must give yourself to personal work with individual members. All of this and more goes

with the territory of serving Christ as an undershepherd of souls.

But every pastor is more than a pastor. He is first and foremost a disciple. Typically he also will be a husband and a father. In addition to this he may take on other ministry-related duties as well. How are all of these important roles to be fulfilled without sacrificing the best on the altar of the good? It is a daunting challenge under the very best of circumstances.

A question which I often ask people I counsel is this: “What, in order of priority, has God called you to be?” It is a clarifying question because it forces an evaluation of life on the basis of what is most important. From time to time I put that question to myself and find that it helps me fight the battle for balance in my life. I would encourage you to make it a practice early in your ministry to stop and ask that question on a regular basis.

A Christian

What has God called me to be? First, He calls me to be a sincere, devoted follower of Jesus Christ. This is so basic that it is easy to take for granted and to forget about it. One great danger of the ministry is professionalism. As you will soon discover, a pastor can become very adept at doing his job. Like any other vocation, certain skills can be developed and polished in the gospel ministry. A pastor can become so proficient in his public ministry that others will regard him as very successful.

But where “professionalism” as a mentality takes over a pastor’s outlook, his heart will inevitably begin to be neglected. And the heart is the primary tool of every pastor. If you are not loving God with all of your heart because you have

neglected the basic responsibilities of discipleship, it does not matter how professionally “successful” you become. In reality, your apparent success will only be a sham.

Spurgeon tells of a pastor who “preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said that he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again.”¹ Such compartmentalization of life may be acceptable in other professions but it is hardly agreeable with vital Christianity and much less with faithful pastoral ministry.

Many good men have been tripped up at this basic level. In fact, the gallery of fallen pastors is a sober reminder of absolute necessity to make your daily discipleship your top priority. Some of the most emotionally trying moments of my ministry have come upon receiving news that another brother has disqualified himself from the pastorate by self-inflicted moral failure. You are still young in the ministry, but make no mistake, such news will too soon make its way to your doors. Men that you know, or know of, whose gifts and graces you judge to be far superior to your own, will be discovered in scandalous sin.

How does this happen? You can be sure that it doesn’t happen all at once. Disqualifying sin always has a history. And at the root of that history is the neglect of spiritual disciplines. As Bunyan’s Christian puts it, one of the earliest steps down the path of apostasy comes when backsliders “cast off by degrees private duties, as Closet-Prayer, Curbing their Lusts, Watching, Sorrow for Sin, and the like.”²

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 17.

² John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (reprint, Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 177.

So, my dear young brother, guard your heart. Go to God's Word first and foremost as a believer. Remember that before you are a shepherd you are a sheep. As a pastor you need the very same things that you commend to others. Follow the wisdom of Robert Murray M'Cheyne who noted, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."³

Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "take heed to yourselves." When he repeats the admonition to Timothy he adds that doing this is an essential ingredient to saving both himself and his hearers (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 4:16). A pastor must make it a matter of disciplined priority to read, meditate on and memorize Scripture—for his own soul's sake. We must also pray for the work of the Spirit in our lives. Anything less is spiritual malpractice.

A Husband

After being a Christian, God has called me (and you) to be is a husband. Like you, I am blessed with a faithful, godly wife. Donna and I take our covenant vows very seriously, which means that I am to have and to hold her above all others. Next to Jesus Christ, she is my top priority.

It is an awesome responsibility to be a husband. Jesus Christ in His relationship to the church is to be our model. Being the head of a household is a great challenge. A godly wife both needs and desires godly leadership from her husband. The call to be a godly husband includes providing such leadership. Christ calls a man to fight against the opposite and equally deadly errors of self-protecting passivity and

³ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 258.

self-serving authoritarianism in the way that he relates to his wife. A passive husband will breed frustration in a wife who desires to be led and may tempt her to become domineering. An authoritarian husband intimidates his wife and may well stifle the development of her spiritual gifts.

In Ephesians 5 Paul makes it clear that Jesus Christ is our model as a husband. His love, sacrifice and care for His bride is to be the pattern for how you relate to Mary. She needs to be secure in your love. She needs to know that she is more important to you than your reputation or the exercise of your public gifts.

A pastor's wife may have the most difficult role in the whole church. Charles Spurgeon noted this with his characteristic wit and tenderness two years before his death. Speaking at a wedding, he said:

If I was a young woman, and was thinking of being married, I would not marry a minister, because the position of minister's wife is a very difficult one for anyone to fill. Churches do not give a married minister two salaries, one for the husband and the other for the wife; but, in many cases, they look for the services of the wife, whether they pay for them or not. The minister's wife is expected also to know everything about the church, and in another sense she is to know nothing of it; and she is equally blamed by some people whether she knows everything or nothing. Her duties consist in being always at home to attend to her husband and her family, and being always out, visiting other people, and doing all sorts of things for the whole church! Well, of course, that is impossible; she cannot be at everybody's beck and call, and she cannot expect to please everybody. Her husband cannot do that, and I think he is a great fool if he tries to do it; and I am certain that, as the husband cannot please everybody, neither can the wife. There will be sure to be somebody or other who will

be displeased, especially if that somebody had herself half hoped to be the minister's wife. Difficulties arise continually in the best regulated churches; and, as I said before, the position of the minister's wife is always a very trying one. Still, I think that if I was a Christian young woman, I would marry a Christian minister if I could, because there is an opportunity of doing so much good in helping him in his service for Christ. It is a great help to the cause of God to keep the minister himself in good order for his work. It is his wife's duty to see that he is not uncomfortable at home; for, if everything there is happy, and free from care, he can give all his thoughts to his preparation for the pulpit; and the godly woman who thus helps her husband to preach better, is herself a preacher though she never speaks in public, and she becomes to the highest decree [sic] useful to the church of Christ committed to her husband's charge.⁴

A pastor's wife sees all of her husband's blemishes and shortcomings and yet must receive instruction in God's Word from him week by week. She lives in a fishbowl. Unrealistic expectations from the congregation can often add great stress to her life. Thoughtless comments, which may or may not be designed to hurt, can wound her deeply. If, in addition to these and other pressures, she feels that her own husband is neglecting her, the pressure can become too great to bear. As a husband, it is my responsibility and privilege to reassure my wife that she is more important to me than any other human relationship that I have. I am called to nurture and cherish her, to help her fulfill her own calling as a woman of God.

⁴ *Spurgeon's Sermons Preached on Unusual Occasions* (Houston, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1978), 248.

Our wives need to be reassured that they are more important to us than our ministries in the church. When this message is clearly and regularly communicated then those inevitable seasons of unusually high demands from the church are more easily weathered.

A Father

The third thing that God has made me is a father. Donna and I have six children, so I get a lot of practice at fatherhood. If pastors' wives have been singled out for special concern, pastors' kids have become proverbially notorious. Too often they are sacrificed for "the sake of the ministry." I remember sitting in my study as a young pastor listening to a retired pastor whose successful ministry was widely acclaimed. He spoke about many of the wonderful things he had experienced in the churches he had served. Then he added, "But I paid a high price for my success. My children did not get what they should have from their father, and today have turned away from the Lord and the church."

As he wept I pondered. At that time my only child was barely a toddler. The draw of never-ending needs and opportunities to minister was tempting me to neglect my family for the sake of "my ministry." But God reminded me that, in terms of priority, He calls me to be a father before He calls me to be a pastor. My children need to know that, next to their mother, they are the most important people in my life. My congregation also needs to know this.

A pastor can easily though unintentionally neglect his children out of a misguided notion that he must always be available to minister to other people. Under the best of circumstances there will always be some disruptions in a pastor's home life. He is on call 24 hours a day. If a death or

tragic accident involving one of the members occurs just before I head out the door to take my son fishing, our plans must necessarily change. Such demands are to be expected.

Because of this two temptations face every pastor who is a father. The first is simply to expect his child to understand his change of plans the same way that he does. As a pastor I know that it is sometimes necessary to interrupt plans in order to minister the gospel of God's grace to hurting people. But, all my young son knows is that he did not get to go fishing because somebody else needed and received his dad's time and attention. Timothy, when this kind of situation arises, be sure to talk to your child, sympathize with him and seek to make it up to him in a reasonable, intentional and timely way.

The other temptation is to become so overwhelmed with guilt because he had to change his plans that the pastor allows his child to manipulate him into actions or decisions that he would not otherwise intentionally pursue. Parenting by guilt has become all too common in our culture, and pastors are unfortunately not immune to it. But, I must confess, it is particularly unattractive when a pastor relates to his children this way. We should intentionally carve out time in our schedules for our children and then guard it scrupulously. When plans affecting your children have to be changed because of ministry emergencies, be diligent in making it up to them.

A Pastor

The fourth thing that God has made me is a pastor. This is my vocational calling. This is what occupies the bulk of my time. I am constantly amazed that God has given me the privilege to serve Him in this way. It is the highest vocational

calling in the world. My responsibilities as a pastor take precedence over any recreational activities or avocations. All that is involved in shepherding the flock of God, which the Bible spells out in a fairly comprehensive way, comprises my duty. In this, my most important tasks are to labor faithfully in the ministry of the Word and in prayer. Again, these must not be carried out simply on a “professional” level. Rather, they must be taken up in the midst of my own pursuit of holiness.

There is an inevitable loneliness that goes with being a pastor. Much of the work that must be done can only be done when a man is alone with his God. Without this intimate time with God, time spent with people will not be of much value. There are a thousand “aids” available to pastors today to enable them to skirt the hard work of study and prayer. “Powerful” sermons and “guaranteed” programs are regularly marketed to pastors with shameless bravado. A man with a little ingenuity, less integrity and ample finances can keep himself well supplied with a constant stream of such resources. But he denies his calling by living off of the work of others rather than doing the work of the ministry himself.

A Helper

Beyond these four callings in my life, I also am involved in helping with other worthwhile endeavors. My work with Founders Ministries (editing the *Founders Journal*, publishing, etc.) and my involvement in my local pastors’ conference and association are all important. You probably have not had much time to get very involved yet with your local pastors’ fellowship. I hope that you will not neglect doing this. Not only will the fellowship be good for you (even when you are not excited about some of the programs and plans that are

promoted), but also you need to recognize that God has gifted you in ways that can be a blessing to your fellow pastors.

For example, Timothy, take advantage of the fact that God has given to you both a love for and the opportunity to purchase many good books. You can be a great blessing to other pastors (and their congregations) simply by looking for and taking advantage of opportunities to recommend good books. Don't assume that everyone is as familiar with sound commentaries, inspirational biographies and good theology texts as you are. Without being officious, try to encourage the reading of good books.

No doubt other opportunities for broader ministry will come your way in time. I hope that you will be open to them and see them as ways that you can be helpful to the larger work of the kingdom. But in terms of priorities I encourage you to keep them ranked below the four things that I mentioned above. I try to keep this in mind myself and when I do I avoid much heartache and confusion.

Maintaining Balance

How do these priorities work? Well, those who know me best can easily testify that I do not always practice what I have written here. Though my desire and intention is never to deviate, I have repeatedly had to make mid-course corrections through the years. But that is the value of having clearly defined priorities. They provide a reliable map to make such adjustments.

Each priority builds on the ones that precede it. That is, it is only as I am faithful to the higher priorities that I can honestly engage in the other, but lower priorities. For example, I want to be faithful in my work with Founders Min-

istries. But I cannot be—no matter how much good might be accomplished through my efforts—if I do that work at the expense of my pastoral responsibilities to Grace Baptist Church. If my involvement with Founders or other broader ministries prevents me from being a faithful pastor in the local church I serve, then I need to disengage from those broader works.

It is not necessary for me to be involved in other ministries in order for me to discharge my pastoral duties faithfully. But, I cannot be a faithful pastor if I neglect the higher priorities of caring for my wife and my children. In fact, according to 1 Timothy 3:4–5, a man is disqualified if such neglect characterizes his life. He must be a man who “rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?).”

Furthermore, I cannot be a faithful father if I fail my wife as a husband. On the contrary, one of the best things I can do for my children is to love their mother very well. No matter how well a man may think he is doing as a father, if he does not demonstrate Christ-like love to his wife then he is doing his children a grave disservice. It seems that if the devil cannot deceive parents into neglecting their children he will tempt them to become child-centered. My children need to learn from their earliest years that their mother has a higher place in my affections than they do. That is no slight to them. Rather, it becomes a basis for security in knowing their God-ordained place in the home.

Just as I cannot be a truly helpful minister beyond my local church if I am not being a faithful pastor, and I cannot be a faithful pastor if I am not being a responsible father, and I cannot be the kind of father I ought if I do not sincerely love

my wife well, so I cannot be a faithful husband if I neglect my relationship with Christ. As I have already suggested, everything else stems from this taproot.

All these priorities relate to each other as if they were levels of a pyramid. Each can be properly served with its respective importance as long as I keep them in their proper place. But when a lower priority leaps above a higher, then I am setting myself up for an unstable life. It is spiritually disastrous to put my wife above my Lord, or my children above my wife, or my pastoral ministries above any of those three. It will be no slight to the church that you serve if you rank them in importance after your devotion to Christ and your family. On the contrary, the church will get more of what they need from you when you minister out of a conscious commitment to these priorities.

As I mentioned, I don't always maintain these priorities in proper balance, but I have made it a settled goal of my life to pursue them. By remembering the priorities of these callings, I am better able to establish and maintain balance in my obligations. Perhaps the most useful discipline to facilitate this balance is learning to say no. Spurgeon said that for a minister, learning to say no is of far greater value than learning Latin! He was right. No matter how much a pastor tries to do there will always be more to be done. Often I find good things screaming out for my attention should be left undone so that I can do what is better and best. When a pastor has to make those hard choices, he should do so on the basis of the priority of his callings. Then he can take heart in knowing that he has acted in faith based on the claims that God has made on his life.

Timothy, I pray that God will help you get a firm grip on your priorities while you are still young in the ministry. Give

my warm greetings to Mary and your boy. Press on in your good work.

In Christ,

Tom

PS—I highly recommend the following three books:

1. *Brothers, We Are not Professionals* by John Piper (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002).
2. *The Christian Ministry* by Charles Bridges (reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980).
3. *Lectures to My Students* by Charles H. Spurgeon (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954).