

Deep Dive into Church Ministry Issues with Ryan Reynolds

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The Church Today

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Challenges Facing the Church

There have been many suggestions concerning the church's greatest challenges today. Some say it is racism (Smith and Emerson). There is a spate of literature on the race issue facing the white evangelical church in America. Some say it is the rise of secularism and pluralism leading to individualism (Trueman). Some point to the powerful influence of social media and the crisis of in-person fellowship, with the COVID pandemic providing an excuse to stay home (Root). Some attribute it to the shallowness of church worship, theology, and practice, pointing to the resurgence to Catholicism from Protestants to find structure, spiritual enchantment, and liturgical substance (Smith). We can find numerous cultural shifts, generational gaps, and unrelenting digital transformation shaping our world.

I will focus here on three urgent challenges the church faces today—polarization of society, cultural influence, and the church's failure to reach younger generations.

Polarization of Society

More than ever, we are a country of division. Our division splits to drastic, even violent, extremes. Things like censorship and the shameless acceptance of violence to advance an ideology were the anomaly in America's past. Today, it is becoming the norm, and even celebrated. The media on both sides of the political spectrum encourages division on every level, normalizing hatred and intolerance.

This creeps into the church. More than ever, Christians confuse their political identity with their Christian identity. We have more emotion over our political stances than we do toward our own sin or toward God. The polarization of society will continue to promote polarization within the church. We must guard against this as a church and show an alternate way forward.

Cultural Influence

In another section I discuss some of the cultural influences facing the church today: LGBTQ+ movement, pornography addiction, racism, Israel, Christian nationalism, etc. Other cultural influences we face could include the influencer culture, the prevalence of screens, and the rise of artificial intelligence.

Many in the church do not know how to respond, partly because many of these issues have risen quickly to the forefront of our culture in recent years. It is more important than ever that we are addressing these cultural issues from the Bible, both as the word is preached and in other ways as a church. Pastors and teachers of any church should stay up to date with the cultural influences bombarding Americans today so that we can equip God's people with a solid framework to live counter-culturally in our present context.

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Church Growth

The Context of Decline

A recent book estimated that we are in the greatest religious shift in America's history with over 40 million Americans walking away from the church (*The Great Dechurching* by Davis and Graham, 2023). This amounts to about 16 percent of our population. Davis and Graham call these people the "dechurched"—people who used to regularly attend church but now come less than once per year. Their study found that right-leaning, Bible-belt believers had some of the highest percentages of those leaving the church (!), with an average age of mid-30s to 40s.

Among mainstream denominations, Presbyterians (PCUSA) lead the way, losing "about 45 percent of their attenders over the last twenty-five years." However, Baptists are losing a whopping 29 percent at the same time. A recent study shows that "Eighty percent of churches in America are plateaued or in decline" (xv). "Out of the 20% left, only 7% grew by planting new congregations to carry the torch into the future," making it that "93% of the church is no longer reproducing itself." Yikes.

Every church should be concerned about growth. By growth I mean whether a church is growing in new converts or growing by planting other churches and sending missionaries. Not every church will plant new churches, but every church should make more disciples, raise up more leaders, and impact its community in tangible ways.

The question of growth is complex. It is important to look not only at a particular church's decline to target areas for growth, but also see what is taking place across America. We must analyze how current nation-wide trends relate to what is happening at church X.

The starting place for addressing any growth relates to examining and honing its purpose. One church's purpose statement I know is this: "to know Jesus Christ as Lord, to grow as His disciples, and to share His love in word and deed." When developing a church growth plan for this church, we should ask: How well is X carrying out each of these purposes? How can X improve on implementing this purpose in each area of its current ministry and developing new ones relevant to the cultural context and needs of the local community?

Areas of Decline or Areas for Improvement

Age distribution is weaker in the younger decades in most churches. Targeting these younger age groups is crucial for the church to sustain itself and grow into the future. For example, if Generation Z reflects an extremely low demographic in some churches, this would be an area of priority to formulate a vision of growth for, as well as, and especially, targeting their parents rather than simply Generation Z.

Many churches focus on membership numbers to evaluate their church's impact miss their true disciple-making purpose as a church. Care is needed to avoid obsession with numerical growth but to focus on imaging Jesus to the world. Sometimes, however, numerical data carefully used can help us to assess how we are doing as a church. Ideas for growth in impact for church X would include targeting specific age brackets in its community, revitalizing its resources for those generations, and developing ministries to better disciple those age groups.

Growth should include strengthening and utilizing the church's current leadership model. There are many biblical models for church government. I have an aversion to the celebrity pastor mentality, and a safeguard is that the senior pastor is one leader among many. I think that a strong leadership model is necessary to effectively grow as a church body as multiple giftings collaborate and develop a strategy to tackle all the areas of growth God calls the church to.

A 2020 Lifeway survey showed that 65% churchgoers attend for community and relationships. Sunday morning Bible studies offer a place for community and relationships, and a quick glance through the descriptions of various Sunday morning Bibles studies reveal that.

Because of this, I believe Sunday morning groups can be another ministry area to bolster for growth. This is especially true since relationships are one of the major factors the dechurched are willing to return to church. A church growth model would include examining the strong ministry areas and considering how these elements can be implemented elsewhere in the church and crafted to reach the weaker demographics.

For most churches discipleship is an urgent area for growth. Discipleship is broader than making new converts, although it includes this. It includes the responsibility to see all believers, however young or old in the faith, grow and mature in their walk with the Lord. Examining all of these areas from outreach efforts to mentorship and spiritual growth should be central in seeking how God would have a church grow as a light in its community. However, the issue of reaching the lost and the dechurched in the community should also be a top priority. For me, it is extremely exciting to think about a renewed passion for a church to think deeply how they can reach more people in their community who need to know Jesus.

Other areas I could discuss are membership, community engagement, marketing, budgeting, and missions. And many more can only be discovered with the staff and the people of a particular church. All in all, growth should be seen as something exciting and hopeful because he is the one who will build his church.

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Church Vision

Analysis

Most churches have more people in their membership role than regular attenders. One goal is to see that reversed: that there would be more people attending on Sunday than people already on the membership role. The church should be actively pulling in both the lost and the dechurched (Christians who have fallen away from attending church). For this to happen, a robust and strategic vision that includes every area of the church is needed.

In my opinion vision formation and implementation can become one of the most exciting, enriching, and God-honoring experiences for a church to collaborate on. Creating and implementing a vision hones your church's unique identity and mission both locally and globally. It gives a confident sense of where we fit and how we function in the kingdom of God. For theologically minded congregations, this is an exciting journey for the congregation, assessing together what is currently working and what is currently not working for the health of the church body.

Because the task is an all-encompassing church project, creating and implementing a vision will take patience, humility, and an eagerness to grow, both from the congregation and the staff. More than anything, it is a collaborative process. It is not the senior pastor's job to create the

vision and dictate it from on high; it is his job to work with the staff and congregation to define that vision and to implement it with dependence on God.

How would I go about including the congregation and the staff in creating and implementing vision? Here are some practical steps.

Clarification of Vision

First, congregational surveys are very helpful. From those we have a lot of information to evaluate and discuss as a staff. One of my first goals as a new senior pastor of any church, as it relates to vision, would be to establish trust with both congregation and staff. True, this can only happen with time, but building relationships with both the staff and church members will be paramount. Also, the kind of sermons, applications, and tone I would begin with in my preaching is crucial in establishing trust in order to successfully develop and implement new vision as a congregation. Meeting with the staff to talk about sermon history and current church struggles would be first on my agenda.

Evaluation of Vision

Next, there is the prayerful evaluation of the church's purpose as a local church body. I realize the staff may have already done some of this during pastoral search committee meetings. Either way, navigating this stage together as a staff is crucial. Together we do the deep dive into your purpose(s) as a church. This phase is about asking and answering questions: if church X is about _____, how well is X accomplishing _____? How do we know X is accomplishing _____?

Evaluation may include the need to refine, reclarify, and recast the church's purpose statements in specific ways. I may suggest the staff to go through a resource together that relates to vision during this process.

Implementation of Vision

Next, we implement the church's vision in each area of ministry. This is a crucial step and requires creativity. For example, if the church wants to see growth in discipleship, a purpose statement would be "to grow as his disciples". Implementing that purpose of growing disciples will require examining each area of ministry: Is the church strong in new converts? How are we discipling the younger ages? Are our outreach efforts focused on making new disciples? Etc.

Obviously, there are many more tasks to be done. It is impossible to know what to include in the creation and implementation of vision for a church I know nothing about first. Implementing vision and discovering a church's God-given purpose is necessary for every incoming senior pastor.

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Top Issues the Church Needs to Get Right

There are so many topics I could talk about here. I could mention the need for compelling, expository preaching that reaches a culture with the attention span of a goldfish (8 seconds). I could mention the need to rediscover a strong theology of social justice. I could mention the importance of getting the gospel in its entirety right including understanding Jesus's rule and reign over the earth (Matt 28:18), believers' liberation from idolatry, ethnic reconciliation of all peoples in Christ, the hope of the new heavens and the new earth, eternal life with God in resurrected bodies, and so on. There are so many topics that I believe are crucial for Christians to get right today.

But there are three issues I would emphasize as especially foundational for the church in its current cultural context to really get right.

Love

We are a nation of division. Violence is out of control. Suicide is rampant. Drugs are ravaging our communities. Prostitution is everywhere. Kids and children are angry. Terrorism is cool. Mass shootings continue. In large part, we are confused. Many preachers say we should preach more on God's holiness. Some say we need more activism. Some say we need more forgiveness. Some say we need more substitutionary atonement and imputed righteousness. But more than all of these, I believe we need to work hard to get the self-giving love of God right in every area of our lives.

With love, there is a lurking danger of sounding cliché or sentimental, teaching this fundamental Christian concept in a shallow, worldly way. Our current social landscape screams out their counterfeit definition of love. As a word that describes the very nature of God himself (1 John 4:8) and sums up the entire law and the prophets (Matt 22:37-40), the immense importance God puts on getting "love" right is often underestimated by many Christians.

Saying that we need to preach more on God's love is like saying we need to remember to brush our teeth before bed. "Of course, of course. We always need to remember to brush our

teeth. I got it. That's important for the health of our teeth. I know how to do that. Thanks." But what I am advocating is a complete makeover in how we understand and communicate the nature of God's love in Christ.

In Ephesians 3 Paul prays that believers have strength to understand the incomprehensible love of Christ. It is concerning to me how few sermons center around Christ's love, especially in some quarters of the church. And in other quarters of the church love is talked about superficially as an accept-everything type of love rather than a transforming love. We must work to get this love right.

I am convinced that a cruciform understanding of love—God's love revealed at the cross—should undergird all Christian theology. All Christian living should be motivated by the cross—a self-giving God who calls us to live out this self-giving love toward others. I believe the love of Jesus is the answer to many of our cultural problems. In our church culture today, I think we have lost some of the ability to see and apply the biblical love of Jesus in our world today. With all the mangling that the word "love" has gotten in our Western culture, Christians need to recover the true biblical meaning of God's love in Christ and its centrality in our lives.

Grace

We need to get grace right as Christians. We need to understand grace as God's unearned kindness and favor that transforms all people, regardless of social status or ethnicity.

In the first century world, grace was brought to a new radical meaning in Jesus. In the Greco-Roman society, it would have been unacceptable to give "grace" to someone who was not worthy to receive it—who did not have a worthy social status. In Christ, Paul flips this social structure on its head. Instead, God gives his favor or kindness regardless of social status, often to the one's society deems unworthy. Grace elevates the most unlikely. This kind of grace was a key characteristic of Jesus's earthly ministry and should be a key characteristic of our lives as Jesus-followers. Grasping God's grace toward us should make us of all people the most gracious to everyone around us (see Matt 18:21-35).

When we truly grasp God's grace, we are empowered to live as new human beings in Christ. Far from grace being a license to continue a sinful lifestyle, true grace transforms us to live reconciled with God, extending His kindness to a world in need.

Fresh Language

The last thing I believe Christians today need to “get right” is biblical language that is fresh, accurate, and meaningful when it comes to explaining the Bible. We need to communicate the story of Scripture and the good news of Christ with language that modern people can understand. Christians should not resort to sentimental cliches and worn-out religious phrases to speak of their Christianity. Christians today need to be true to Biblical Christianity while using fresh, concrete words and ideas to communicate it. We need to tell the story of Jesus in a fresh way.

We are losing people because they are hearing the gospel told in an unbiblical way. Sometimes it’s because we have gotten the truth itself wrong. Other times it’s because we are using old words and religious phrases that have lost their meaning in our culture. Christians today should regularly ask, “What does this actually mean?” (Sometimes we may find that we don’t even really understand what we are saying ourselves!) We should be able to communicate even the most profound biblical truths in every-day, simple English that even the most un-churched people can understand.

As Christians we should approach God’s word with a teachable attitude, acknowledging that the NT was birthed in a world different than our own, in a language different than our own. We must approach the Bible with a hermeneutic of humility, absorbing its truth and carefully putting that truth into modern language our generation cannot misunderstand. In short, we need to make the story of Christianity attractive, compelling, inviting. We need to work hard at communicating the matchless Jesus story in a life-altering way. It is not easy, but if we “get right” HOW we communicate the good news, we will better reach the rapidly changing culture we belong to.

Cultural Currents Affecting the Church

LGBTQ+ and The Church

I believe the Bible is clear that homosexuality is a sin. I believe the Bible is clear about marriage being between one man and one woman, as made in God’s image. I do not condone the LGBTQ+ movement in any way. Many in the church today share this unwavering conviction.

At the same time, this group of people is made up of boys and girls, men and women, who are human beings with hopes and dreams, hurts and baggage. The church at large has done a poor

job at showing genuine care and compassion in a way that attracts LGBTQ+ people. I know some of my wonderful pastor friends would see my previous statement as impossible: “How can a church that preaches the gospel of God’s holiness and salvation attract people with same sex attraction?”

In my twenties I was a leader in a thriving young adults ministry at a large SBC church in Houston, TX. Interestingly, our ministry attracted many people who not only struggled with same sex attraction but also openly lived that lifestyle. Ministry during those times could be messy and difficult, but it was also beautiful and transformative to see God at work bringing true (although at times slow and difficult) change.

How did this happen? Our ministry offered a non-threatening environment that was understanding to that community’s struggles, constant honest communication, non-shaming discussion, and Christ-centered discipleship. We offered hope without condemnation and patience in the painful transformation process. We were committed to ministry for that group, and they brought their friends.

Part of the question of approach to the LGBTQ+ comes down to exclusion and embrace. How does the church love and embrace sinners without endorsing sinful behavior? When and how do we “exclude”? Is it right to “embrace” others while they live in sin? And what does that look like, done well?

But Christians of all people should show genuine concern for marginalized, hurting people. Some believers’ “truth in love” approach toward people with same sex attraction is like trying to give someone a hug while running away from them. We speak of care and compassion, but our behavior can tell a different story.

In no way do I approve the LGBTQ+ lifestyle. Overall, each situation calls for prayer, wisdom, and genuine concern for individuals. It is a complex situation that the church needs to navigate in a delicate way.

Praise

Let me praise and lament what I believe the church at large gets right and wrong about this issue.

In the current literature and practice, there is growing understanding for the inner complexities of same sex attraction/lifestyle. This is a good thing. It is not simply taught as often that “you’re gay and need to stop it.” Tracing the issue to the roots gives us a better ability to counsel those struggling and offer true help for change. (Perhaps a large factor is the oversized elephant in most people’s room: internet pornography. More on this issue below.)

Lament

It is lamentable that the Evangelical church at large still often lacks compassion when it comes to the LGBTQ+ movement. Christians who want to angrily point the finger at all the disgusting “gays” out there suddenly find themselves staring in the mirror of shame as they struggle with secret pornography addiction. We need to temper our approach to the LGBTQ+ issue with humility and balance.

I understand this can be difficult. Today, a parody of love is that love equals acceptance, and if there is no acceptance, there is no love. This is certainly false. But we should do our best to embrace people, whether LGBTQ+ or not, in such a way that we offer a love that honors the person and offers real transformational hope.

Pornography Addiction and the Church

It is disturbing to me that pornography addiction is not more in the discussion of major cultural issues facing the church. To some degree, it is a more urgent issue than the LGBTQ+ movement—partly because it is more ubiquitous than the LGBTQ+ movement and partly because internet pornography is fueling the LGBTQ+ movement.

Barna Group’s 2016 study showed that 20 percent of Americans 13 and older use porn weekly or more, and 11 percent of American men 13 and older view porn daily.¹ In contrast, one percent of American females 13 and older use porn daily, while 7 percent use it weekly or more. That same study found that 1 in 5 youth pastors and 1 in 7 senior pastors use porn regularly.² A 2014 study conducted by Barna Group for Proven Men Ministries revealed that 64 percent of American men view porn at least once a month, while 29 percent between the ages of 18 and 39 view it daily; and 64 percent Christian men (like the national average) view porn at least once a month, with 37 percent of Christian men view it several times a week.³ Similarly, according to the University of Texas, 65 percent of young adult men and 18 percent of young adult women have

¹ Barna Group and Josh McDowell, *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age*, 1st edition (Barna Group, 2016), 141-142.

² Group and McDowell, *The Porn Phenomenon*, 158–159.

³ Proven Men, “Pornography Survey Statistics,” *Proven Men*, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://www.provenmen.org/pornography-survey-statistics-2014/>; “Proven Men.Pdf,” n.d.

reported watching porn once a week.⁴ As with all statistics there are questions regarding data and interpretation of data,⁵ but, whether more or less, the numbers are high and pastors have a growing problem at hand.

Most people, religious or not, believe pornography is a problem. But I give these numbers to paint the enormity of the problem in our culture and church. As my resume shows, I am writing my dissertation for my Doctor of Ministry on how pastors address pornography in their congregations. I chose this topic for three main reasons.

One, I used to struggle with pornography and had poor help from Christians when it came to getting free from it. (I have been free from viewing any pornography for 8 years now. Praise God!)

Two, pastors and Christian families continue to have problems with knowing how to help people who struggle with it.

Three, pornography addiction continues to grow for all ages and genders and to begin at an increasingly earlier age. It causes many mental, emotional, and social issues in our society, ranging from social anxiety and depression to suicide and murder. The church should approach this topic both graciously and seriously.

Christian Nationalism and the Church

I am not a fan of using words that contain a lot of baggage (“nationalism” being one) and attaching them to the word “Christian.” At best this way of “Christianizing” a secular concept creates confusion, but worse, it can promote division in the church and be unnecessarily provocative.

The following quote encapsulates the Christian Nationalism movement (I believe this is from Douglas Wilson): “Christian nationalism is not simply a political movement; it is the acknowledgement that our national identity, laws, and values must reflect the truth of God’s Word and the lordship of Christ.”

Without context, I can say yes and no to this at the same time. Yes, our identity, laws, and values should reflect the truth of God’s Word and the lordship of Christ. But, no in that we are not

⁴ “Pornography Addiction - Resources - Student Counseling Center - UT Dallas,” accessed November 26, 2022, <https://counseling.utdallas.edu/pornaddiction/>.

⁵ For example, see Joe Carter’s response to the 2014 Proven Men survey conducted by Barna. Joe Carter, “FactChecker: Do Christian Men Watch More Pornography?,” *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-do-christian-men-watch-more-pornography/>.

called upon to legally and forcefully impose Christian identity and values upon people, if that is the logical outworking of that ideology. Things are always more complex when implementing what you believe into real life.

Two, I believe the church should certainly be involved in transforming culture—whether politics, entertainment, the workplace, etc.—but that does not mean everyone should be forced to adopt Christianity and apply its ethics to every area of life. It would be nice if that worked! But the Bible calls that, “The New Heavens and Earth.”

And last, I fear that most American Christians have an easier time defining what it means to be an American than what it means to be a Christian. In fact, many equate “American” with “Christian” and fail to see that most American traits and goals (materialism and pride, to name a couple) are the exact opposite of what Jesus said should define his followers (see the Beatitudes, for example).

I am 100% in favor of the gospel changing every sphere of our lives and we as the church being salt and light in our culture. My prayer and aim are the same as our Lord’s, “May your kingdom come, ON EARTH as it is in heaven.” I believe that in this endeavor we should be mindful that Christ’s kingdom is made up of believers from all nations (not just America). In our efforts to influence culture we should also be careful we do not conflate American values with Christian ones.

Israel and Racism

I put these two massive topics together because they can be related, even though each could be treated separately and more thoroughly.

Israel

I currently serve at a church that is home to Paula White Ministries. My brother-in-law, Brad Knight, is the son of Paula White-Cain, a well-known prosperity televangelist. Currently, she serves as President Trump’s top spiritual advisor. At our church, adopting a politically conservative, pro-stance on Israel is almost equated with proof of your salvation.

Here is my take. I love Israel. But I also love all other nations Christ died for (Eph. 2). My love for all nations is reflected in my desire to see all nations come to Christ. I am for Israel in the same way I am for all other nations: I desire all nations to see Jesus as the ultimate solution for all things. I stand for Israel like I stand for all nations: I am united with the good and opposed to the evil.

Who is innocent in the conflict between Israel and Palestine? Neither. Both sides have done wrong, because both sides have evil people in their land. God shows no favoritism. And the one true God is not calling either of them to a “Holy War” as convinced as they both may be about that. My heart goes out to Israel and their situation, just like my heart goes out to Palestinians and their situation. I want to see God’s justice and God’s mercy come to Hamas (can I say that?), as well as to Israel, and America, and Haiti. God has a special plan for every nation or people, and that plan is summed up in Christ (Eph. 1; Col. 1).

I believe as Christians we need to be careful to be Jesus-centered in our thinking about Israel and every other nation on earth. It’s easy for Christians today to be swept up in the noise and forget Christ commissioned us for the salvation of those from every nation, not just Israel or America for that matter.

Racism

The issue of racism is much more complex, and I do not have the space to detail all my thoughts on racism in the church and in America. However, this topic was a big part of one of my doctoral classes called “Contemporary Issues.” I read both *White Fragility* and *Divided by Faith*, as well as many other books and articles on the topic.

Currently, I serve at a multi-ethnic, predominantly African American congregation. Before Paula took the position as Trump’s spiritual advisor, I’d estimate that the congregation was 80% black with a 90% white pastoral staff. Following her commitment to that position during Trump’s presidency, she lost many members, and the church became more diverse. Now both the staff and the congregation are pretty evenly blended. I grew up in Houston, TX, and had many friends who were black. I often lived in areas where there should have been rampant racism, according to standards by many people in the media today.

Why do I mention this? From a personal point of view, I feel the issue of racism in America has been miscommunicated in many ways. From an empirical point of view, increased literature and people are showing that to be true. However, that does not make racism a non-issue in the church or in America. There are certainly pockets of prejudice left in the church today. This is a shame. But there are plenty of places where racism is not hindering the Christian community but instead there is unity and deep friendships across races.

The argument that white evangelicals are primarily responsible for a continued racialized society, as argued in *Divided by Faith*, is like the angry atheist’s argument that if you are religious, you are primarily responsible for war and mayhem in the world. The reasons for racism in America

are extremely complex, just like war in the world is extremely complex. Saying that white evangelicals should be held responsible for not stopping the race problem in America is like saying all religious people should be held responsible for not stopping war in the world. Racialization in America is way more complex than many posit. We should approach this topic with measured wisdom.

On the other hand, it is obvious our systems of measuring human value in America favor the rich. When it comes to money, we could not care less if you're White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, etc. Socio-economic status and privilege may cause more issues of discrimination in the church today than race. Whoever makes the most money is respected and considered "privileged" whether you're blue, pink, or purple.

As Christians we are to be careful to show no partiality due to any factor at all, either race or wealth, but treat all people with equal dignity, value, and honor.

My Ministry Profile

My Daily Commitment in Ministry

The foundational disciplines of my ministry are personal, biblical learning and prayer.

Biblical Learning

I am committed to learning because God transforms his people through renewing the mind. We are renewed inwardly as we learn from God (Rom 12:1-2). Our Christian life is strengthened and fueled through learning. It is my goal to always maintain a teachable, humble posture of learning. This is a nonnegotiable commitment in my ministry.

Prayer

Timothy Keller wrote a book on prayer later in his ministry. He felt like he had not been equipped to write on prayer until many decades into his ministry. That motivates me to work daily at this. Prayer is a constant discipline that never feels mastered.

I incorporate both learning and prayer into my daily routine. To do this, I wake early and begin by reading Scripture with prayer. I periodically research and buy the latest resources on theology and biblical studies and incorporate those into my routine. I spend a good portion of my

day with knowledge work. My wife and I enjoy continually discussing what we are learning with each other and our kids.

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My Calling in Ministry

Preaching

Preaching drives my passion for pastoral ministry. It deeply excites me because in it is the process of theological discovery and homiletical creativity. It is thrilling to study God's word to uncover new gems and then present that treasure to others. I enjoy the challenge of communicating Scripture in a culturally relevant way to each specific congregation. I love the entire process of preaching and the challenge to apply Scripture to everyday life in a way everyone can understand.

Shepherding

Shepherding fuels me because as a pastor this involves hanging out with people and building intentional relationships. What could be a cooler job! Yes, I know, it is a lot more than that, but to a large degree shepherding is relational work. The more challenging side of this is that a shepherd must be there for people in the worst of times: the death of a child, a season of terminal illnesses, a painful divorce, and so on. But even this is a part of ministry that I count a great privilege as a pastor.

Vision-Casting

I consider vision-casting and implementation a major part of a senior pastor's role. In my experience this has been a more challenging piece although a very rewarding one. The task of vision-casting is teaching the purpose of the church in all areas of ministry, and implementation is collaborating with others to accomplish it.

Challenge

In certain church contexts, it can be a challenge to unite everyone with the same clear purpose, making progress jointly as a body to implement those purposes in specific ways. It can be hard for varying opinions, values, tastes, and generations to hear one another and work together toward a common goal. But this is a challenge I enjoy undertaking as a pastor with patience, collaboration, and prayerful consideration at how God is directing us as a community.

Big Picture

In all of these, the exciting thing to me about pastoral ministry is seeing people come together in Christ to be transformed by His Spirit. Ministry is about partnering with God under his authority as he works to transform people as the new humanity. Pastors offer broken people hope and change from a cruciform perspective: a worldview shaped by the love of Jesus on the cross that reverses our understanding of power, values, and status. This is an exciting mission to be a part of.

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My Leadership Style

Discipleship

My leadership style is collaborative and equipping. I believe in building teams for ministry, supporting existing ones, involving people in the decision-making processes, and biblically equipping others to use their gifts. This plays into my discipleship process in several ways.

First, I believe the church should unite in the common goal to make disciples. Making disciples is a collective effort. We are after the common goal to see people changed by Jesus' love and to grow in that love. My role as a pastor is to give a unified vision of this in our specific community and to help motivate and mobilize others to accomplish this task together.

Second, because there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to the disciple-making process, we should see this task as something that requires everyone's unique gifts—and be creative! God himself empowers the body for the work of ministry, and each person has a unique role to play. Making disciples should be multifaceted in approach with attention given to individual giftings and community context. Some will make disciples through teaching. Some will make disciples by modeling hospitality. Some will make disciples by teaching new believers what it looks like to raise their children. And so on. My role as a pastor is to make sure systems are in place to equip everyone for the work of ministry and to ensure that these various types of ministries are recognized and healthily working together in the church body without being sidelined or overlooked.

Teaching all that Jesus commanded entails a comprehensive vision of living out one's faith in the world, and the church should be creative in what it looks like to teach and model that. We should consider a comprehensive and wholistic approach to discipleship that aims to transform human beings and the way they live in the world. The church at large at times has the tendency to treat all people like objects to be converted rather than unique individuals made in God's image. This objectifying approach can be off-putting to the lost. Our goals are misguided here, producing would-be believers who jump ship at the allure of money or the prospect of persecution (Matt. 13:18-23). Unbelievers are starting to sniff out our approach as insincere (a common complaint from outsiders is the lack of authenticity in the church). But there is hope! There is hope in the cross of Jesus to change people from the inside out. We are called to view people as humans who need a wholistic understanding of God's design of life. By the grace of God, we can make progress to see lives changed.

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Changing my Beliefs

I grew up in a Christian home where the rapture loomed over your life like a bomb with an undefined fuse. At any moment, the rapture could explode onto your world, causing mayhem and chaos as you fly through the clouds to meet a welcoming Jesus, or, worse, stay in the rubble to one day meet an angry Jesus. My childhood days were filled with thoughts of smashing through my ceiling stark-naked when eating my Lucky Charms at the breakfast table because of Jesus' return. I envisioned a flash of neatly folded clothes ("Left Behind" style) as I vanished into the sky.

Since those days, I have gone back and forth multiple times on different views of eschatology. This has been a gradual journey of learning and growing. Now, instead of obsessing on timelines and predictions and dogmatic interpretations of certain prophetic imagery, I have come to focus on and celebrate the certainty of Jesus's return and his creating the new heavens and earth one day.

This is only one example of a shift in a major topic. However, there have been many others throughout my Christian life. I believe that our views and perspectives should always be growing and changing if we are learning and growing. One of my greatest joys in my Christian walk is discovering new depths to God's word, correcting and renewing my thinking.

I constantly aim for a humble and teachable posture of student rather than an “I have arrived” posture of an expert. Assuming you will not change as a pastor on a position because you already have “rock-solid” theology lacks the theological understanding of the depth of God’s Word and the ongoing transformation process we are called to as Christians. So, as a pastor I try to maintain a hermeneutic of humility, where I am open to change whenever the Bible dictates change. I think this is a helpful attitude for a pastor to model for the congregation as well.

At the same time, there are certain essential beliefs related to orthodox Christianity and ethics that will never change. There is an unchanging hermeneutical principle that governs my theology: the clear essentials of Christianity will not change or it would not be Christianity. Our only authoritative rule and guide is the Bible, and it is only the Bible by which we can grow in our Christian beliefs.

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Implementing Change in a Church

One of the biggest areas that needed change when my wife and I arrived StoryLife Church was the children’s ministry. Yes, that is right, the whole children’s ministry: everything from safety protocol to philosophy of ministry to Sunday morning worship to volunteer teams to the theology that governed it all. Another tricky factor was that the prior children’s pastor still attended the church. Also, the senior pastor wanted an environment that was the opposite of our vision and desire. However, he gave us the freedom to change how we saw fit, so we tackled it. We were able to significantly change the whole program, all while keeping peace among the staff and team and creating more enthusiasm among the congregation for children’s ministry! Praise God.

Vision Casting and Unity for Change

First, how we cast the vision was crucial to keeping unity and bringing people on board. My wife and I revamped the purpose statement for the children’s ministry. We took our time in casting the vision graciously to staff, volunteers, and the congregation. We spoke about the importance of safety in the children’s ministry. We spoke about the value of children and the importance of intentional discipleship. We immediately implemented Ministry Safe.

We met with the volunteer teams to discuss why and how we would implement new policies, structures, and themes. I made announcements in Sunday services during this first push to educate the congregation in our vision and Biblical values for the children's ministry. Regular communication, enthusiastic and persuasive vision casting, and team training were crucial first steps to get everyone on board and begin moving together in a better direction.

Big Change and Patience in the Process

Before my wife and I came on staff, the children's program was intended most importantly to be entertaining for the kids. The senior pastor wanted, above all things, for the kids to walk away from Sunday morning saying they "had fun." This was the purpose statement we were given. There had been minimal teaching, minimal personal discipleship, and minimal true worship.

So we had our challenge: how do we shift the entire philosophy and practice of the children's ministry without offending the head pastor? How do we bring the ministry along in a better direction without being combative, offensive, or dismissive? We were dealing with an entire theological tradition as we sought to bring the program from entertainment-based to discipleship-focused.

We know that the most true, deep change is a gradual process. So, we started step by step, little by little, to make changes we knew would head the program in the right direction. We scoured the best curriculum that offered discipleship principles and would be user friendly for our charismatic team members and class leaders. We brought them along in the process, regularly checking in for feedback and adjusting. We changed the worship style to be less silly and more genuine, working with the worship team to pick richer songs and set a better tone for the kids. We implemented personal prayer and life-application questions and shared these experiences with parents and the team.

We continued to vision-cast and share positive success stories of change, both with senior pastors, team members, and with the congregation. People became positive and enthusiastic about all the changes happening. With a solid purpose moving forward, we were able to garner more excitement for kids ministry and recruit even more volunteers to be a part (the kids ministry team has tripled since we first came)! The kids and parents have also responded well with this more intentional discipleship.

In other words, the changes have come in a patient process (as all the best changes come) and the response has been wonderful. Patience and perseverance have been keys to this going so

well, along with gracious and persuasive education rather than dictatorial decrees. We are hopeful the changes we have implemented will continue to bear fruit after we are gone.

My Strengths in Ministry

Shepherding

Shepherding is a top strength in my ministry. Shepherding is an area that God has slowly worked with me on. Early on I saw pastoral ministry primarily as a call to preach. Fresh out of seminary, I was going to proclaim the gospel to the masses! Well, things do not always turn out the way you imagine while buried in books of old dead guys.

But God was gracious, and I slowly learned that ministry is more about people than it is about spewing out theological knowledge. I liked to tell my seminary students that ministry is glamorous until you are in ministry, and if ministry is glamorous while you're in ministry, then you probably are not in real ministry. I still consider ministry wonderful and amazing, but it can also be messy and challenging. Shepherding is about the incarnational love of Jesus: entering the pain and problems of others to embody the love of Jesus to them. This perspective of shepherding has also changed my preaching to be more applicational and transformational—getting down into what's real in people's lives.

Shepherding is an area in my ministry that I continue to grow in.

Preaching

I believe another one of my top strengths is preaching the Bible in a biblical, clear, relevant way. My passion to preach God's Word has driven me for almost two decades now. I do not consider myself to have mastered preaching. I see it as a strength because of my continued drive to grow in my preaching, my education, my experience, and the testimonies of people from various backgrounds that my preaching is biblical, Christ-focused, clear, and practical.

Biblical

My first goal in preaching is to be biblical. I am sure that is the goal of most pastors. However, judgment of whether preaching is "Biblical" depends largely on the theological framework of the listener. In saying I seek to be biblical in my preaching I am saying that theological systems and traditions take back seat to my analysis and interpretation of the text and context(s) of Scripture.

Creeds and confessions can help guide interpretation, but you should never use them as a lens through which to interpret all of Scripture. The best way to interpret Scripture is to study the

original contexts, cultures, and languages of Scripture. I consider the many hours I enjoy doing this in sermon prep a strength.

Inspiration and Relevance

I also seek to inspire and to be relevant in my preaching. An uninteresting sermon is, well, uninteresting. I think a lack of inspiration and relevance in preaching have contributed to the de-church movement: believers becoming disillusioned and disenfranchised with the enthralling story of Jesus. Inspiration and relevance have been a strength in my preaching.

Jargon-Free

I consider another one of my strengths in preaching is my relentless passion to preach jargon-free. Many preachers use technical (“churchy”) vocabulary that is consistent with their denominational traditions but is unintelligible to outsiders. This is an easy rut to fall into as a pastor because you do not have to explain yourself in simple, concrete terms. Everyone in your theological camp considers the jargon “solid” while unbelievers, new believers, and people outside your theological camp are left in the dark.

For example, if I say, “Christ’s righteousness was imputed to our account because of God’s matchless glory, not because of our works but by the beauty of God’s unmerited grace,” that may sound spiritual, but it will mean absolutely nothing to many of the people who need to hear the message the most. Even for mature Christians, speaking in overused, technical language can become empty of meaning and merely produce an emotional buzz. In language like this, we do not really know (or we have forgotten) what we are saying. Jargon-free preaching offers an edge to a pastor both in impacting the un-churched and refreshing the thinking of mature Christians. I consider it a strength in my preaching.

Teaching Preaching

Following my senior pastor position of seven years, I became the Dean of Students at a small seminary in the Rocky Mountains—my alma mater. One responsibility I had was to listen to and offer constructive feedback for seminary students as part of their preaching course. This experience stretched me to consider all facets of preaching. I formulated many valuable principles from those many days as I worked with the students through the challenges of effective delivery, biblical exposition, and relevant application.

Overall, preaching is a learning endeavor I am constantly cultivating. There will always be something I am improving in my preaching. And this focus is something I also have found as a

strength—not allowing myself to be complacent but pushing myself to better serve God’s people as a pastor.

Conflict Resolution in the Church

Conflict Resolution

There are several biblical principles that I use to navigate conflict within the church.

I start with consideration. In any conflict, I do my best to consider where both parties come from. If I am the offended party, I do the painful work of trying to understand the other’s point of view. If mediating between two parties, I aim for both sides to understand where each other is coming from. In all conflict, there should be careful, objective consideration to humbly hear out the other side.

Next, I try to better examine my own heart, or, if in counseling, I encourage the offended party to do this. This allows us to consider the root issue of the conflict (sometimes our own sin and faulty thinking is mixed in). Conflict is rarely a one-way street.

Finally, I consider the path toward reconciliation. The cross of Jesus is the basis for this. Not all conflict will be reconciled through agreement, but as Jesus followers we should have the desire to reconcile. This requires wisdom for each situation. As Christians we have the obligation to work toward reconciliation, both in forgiveness and unity in Christ.

Differences of Opinion among Christians

I used to think that the Apostle Paul’s main theme throughout his letters was justification by faith. However, with a closer look at Paul’s most frequently used phrases, I believe a better way to understand the grand theme of Paul’s letters is to consider Paul’s ever-present phrase “in Christ” or related phrases. In Paul’s context this referred to the unity of Jew and Gentile in a common Savior. Paul’s passion for this unity among believers was often the reason for writing his letters.

When I understood this enormous theme in Paul, I started to investigate my own heart on unity between brothers and sisters in Christ who differ from me theologically and otherwise.

I currently serve at a church that years ago I would never have dreamed I would be serving at. I came out of seminary with all theological guns cocked and aimed at everyone who had a different opinion than I did. I eventually came to realize that there are bigger issues at stake than much of what Christians fight about. (Imagine that!) I also came to have a passion to work toward

unity among believers and to focus on the bigger task of making a difference in people's lives for Christ. There are three major things I have learned about unity while pastoring.

One, 99% of ministry will happen outside of the classroom and away from deep theological debate. This principle allows me to unite on the essentials and cultivate relationships with those who differ theologically. Churches should be a place of differences under a common goal—to make Jesus-followers of all nations. Pastors should remember that ministry is not seminary. Church work is about uniting with others in Christ. The context of ministry is life, not the classroom.

Two, most of the time we do not properly understand the other side when disagreeing with another believer. When we do, it often is not as big of a deal as we make it out to be. While at Storylife, I have had to learn a whole new vocabulary to understand what these Christians here really mean (which is often different than how it sounds). I have practiced putting the differences aside as secondary (as much as I am passionately against many of their views) and diving deeper into our common ground in Christ.

And last, I handle difference of opinions by taking to heart our call to be like Jesus. Jesus had a dying, self-giving concern for people. He had a kingdom view and eternity focus when it came down to what matters most. As ministers, we will be happier and more like Jesus if we can learn to look beyond our own preferences and be willing to put the opinions of others before our own (1 Cor 13:5). As a pastor, a passage that motivates me toward this is Philippians 2:3: “in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” The passage challenges us pastors to adopt the mind of Jesus toward others, both congregants and colleagues. Paul grounds this challenge with a hymn about Jesus. God himself came down to die a criminal's death on a cross because he considered not his own advantage but the advantage of others. This picture of God's humility inspires me to proceed humbly when faced with conflict within the church.

Conflict and differences can be messy processes, but ultimately, they are healthy processes for us Christians to work through with the goal of finding our unity in Christ.

Preventing Pastoral and Staff Burnout

Burnout is a growing problem for people in ministry, especially senior pastors. The book *Resilient Ministry* (by my dissertation prof) outlines at least six reasons for burnout: high expectations, isolation, work-life imbalance, emotional labor, conflict and criticism, and lack of resources.

I recognize burnout in myself and in staff in three ways. Emotional fatigue and poor physical health can be a sign that something is off. (Perhaps the best gauge is to just ask my wife!) For staff, a big way to gauge emotional strength and health in ministry is to know them. I must meet with staff and growing relationally to recognize burnout. Open communication plays a big role.

In addition to communication, accountability, resources, rest, and encouraging staff in their progress and accomplishments in the ministry should take place to address burnout in ministry.

These principles below help me to balance ministry and life.

One, spiritual self-care is non-negotiable. The very nature of pastoral ministry demands that I am pursuing the lord with all my heart, soul, and mind so that I can encourage God's family to do the same.

Two, it has been important that I am gauging and looking after the spiritual health of my wife and kids. Frequently, we watch sermons together from other pastors/churches . We also read books and do devotions together that encourage us to pursue the Lord together and individually.

Three, physical self-care has played a big role for me to balance the demands of ministry and personal life. I have a strict workout and run routine that provides an outlet to relive stress and be connected to God's world. I have found that taking care of myself physically does wonders to minimize stress and enhance my knowledge work and emotional demands as a pastor.

Four, we make sure we are taking breaks, trips, and regular rest days as a family. We love tent camping, fishing, and sightseeing. We set aside a day of the week to rest. We love eating out, and we love to spend time with friends. I have found that these things create a balance and harmony in life even in seasons when ministry can threaten to overwhelm.

And five, cultivating my relationship with my wife is crucial for maintaining a healthy life balance. Because we are in ministry together in ways different than a secular job, it is very important we communicate with each other about our spiritual life, stress level, and kids. So we talk. And we talk. And we talk. And we pursue the Lord together.

Establishing Trust in Ministry

Trust is foundational in all relationships. Research indicates that the congregation is more likely to engage in the ministries of the church if there is strong trust between the pastor and the people. Trust also facilitates conflict resolution and provides a safe place for congregants and seekers.

What actions do I take to gain people's trust?

Authenticity and Transparency

These two go hand in hand, and these two can be easy NOT to do for a pastor. However, if you are not authentic or transparent as a pastor, you will never gain people's trust. In my preaching, relationships, and counseling I always aim for these.

Communication

Communication is key. I communicate with the staff and the congregation frequently and thoroughly. Having an open line of communication plays a big role in allowing the staff and the people to know they are heard and valued.

Compassion

Compassion is another important area for building trust. People must feel that you truly care. If you are not compassionate to specific needs and problems, very little trust will be built between the pastor and the people.

Fellowship

There can be no trust, authenticity, communication, or compassion without fellowship. Pastors must fellowship frequently with brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to spend time with others regularly, freely, and joyfully as our church family.

