

The Heart of Ministry Failure and Success:

Focusing on God or Self

by

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Research Proposal

Laying at the heart of Christian ministry is the focus on God or oneself, which ultimately guides the direction of a ministry's consequent success or failure. Ministries play a critical role in serving others and reflecting the light, love, image, and glory of God. More necessary, believers in ministry are graced with the task of serving others out of an abundant overflow and outpour of love from a heart after God. However, despite having such a potent mission to uphold, many ministries have been seen abusing their power, making costly mistakes, misguiding the people, bending into fallen human nature, and, ultimately, failing. Gnawing questions begin to arise, such as why do ministries fail? What is the root cause of ministry failure? Why does God allow this to happen? And how can we avoid this pressing issue? These are questions that this paper will seek to answer.

Outline

Thesis Statement: At the heart of all Christian ministries is the focus on God or self which furthermore drives its consequent failure or success.

- I. Ministry plays a role in Christianity as a fundamental outlet for spreading the Gospel by serving God and serving others.
 - A. Ministry matters because the church and body of Christ act as a finger, pointing to Christ, and inviting others to partake in the Gospel.
 - i. In The Great Commission, Jesus tells His followers to go and make disciples of all nations under the Gospel.
 - B. Ministry involves the sacrificial act of loving, serving, and suffering for others.
 - i. Above all else, ministry is self-denying and sacrificial by nature in highlighting the necessity of service.
 - C. This is how ministry works: God's love is displayed in Jesus, Christ's love is shown in His people, service and ministry are the outpour of this love, and now others get to partake in this love.
 - i. Ultimately, ministry is derived from the love of God serving as the center of which all else revolves.
- II. The main catalyst for failure in Christian ministry and leadership is when the focus of Christ is lost.
 - A. As with all other products of the fall, the root of ministry failure is traced back to sin and human depravity.
 - i. Sin involves becoming creature-centered rather than God-centered.

- ii. When the rightful place of Christ at the heart of ministry is replaced with idols of self, others, or other fickle things this is where the problem begins.
 - B. Several branches are factors of the root of ministry failure, all of which fall under the category of losing the heart of God.
 - i. The hearts of those in ministry, as well as the recipients of service, are not aligned with the Lord's heart.
 - ii. Example one: Keeping unrealistic expectations is a common denominator of failure, where many leaders can eventually become discouraged.
 - iii. Example two: When the issue of pride causes leaders to become corrupt with selfish gain or desires.
 - C. When a ministry is not planted alongside the River of Life it will not flourish or produce meaningful fruit.
 - i. Christ is the head of the church; He is everything while we are not.
- III. Along with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a leader's main defense in combatting ministry failure is by perpetually placing Christ at the center.
 - A. The answer to avoiding ministry failure is found in God's Word; most especially, in the Pastoral Epistles.
 - i. 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are practical, principal letters from Paul to leaders in the faith who were assigned the task of running a ministry.
 - ii. The core message of each of these Epistles is remaining passionate in Christ and firm in sound doctrine.
 - B. The biblical concept of remaining vertically focused, with a ministry's sole gaze on God, is a truth that involves loving and serving Him alone.

- i. Begin by following the first command to love and worship God alone, only then will all else fall into place.
- C. When a ministry's focus is on loving and worshipping God alone, then leaders learn to have a healthy horizontal focus on the entire body of Christ.
 - i. Ministry according to the Bible: Christ is at the head, the focus and gaze are placed upward toward the heavenly, and God's people are interlinked together to make the body.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” In other words, loving Jesus but not the church. What is the church doing wrong? Why is there so much negativity surrounding Christians? Ministry and the church play a critical role in positively representing Christianity and the faith, yet some have often earned a negative or unpopular reputation. Whether it be huge scams and scandals, wolves in sheep’s clothing, or low church attendance in general, ministry failure has given Christianity an unfortunate status in religious conversations. Scripture’s key doctrine of ministry and leadership is stated to be firmly grounded in Truth, yet many seem to stray from this. For example, the Pastoral Epistles emphasize the importance of teaching sound doctrine and remaining a sure testimony of God to the world. Because ministries hold such an important role, we need to determine the factors that cause ministries to fail. When a ministry fails to accomplish the task of glorifying and pointing to Yahweh this creates harmful misperceptions about the faith. Ultimately, the root of this issue is the fact that ministries and their leadership become inwardly self-focused on personal will rather than God-focused on His purposes and desires. At the heart of all Christian ministries is the focus on God or self, which furthermore drives its consequent failure or success.

Ministry plays a role in Christianity as a fundamental outlet for spreading the Gospel by serving God and serving others. First understanding the nature and mission of the church is essential to unpacking the nature of ministry failures and successes. Looking to the Scriptures, which is our ultimate guide for understanding every outlet of Christianity, ministry is defined as the building up of the body of Christ:

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry,

for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head- Christ (*NKJV*, Eph. 4.11-15).

When leaders fail to understand this primary role of ministry as spoken of in God's Word, everything will inevitably fall apart. Unfortunately, there have been numerous instances of leaders not taking the power of their roles in ministry seriously. The concept of leadership in the modern-day church must focus on God, His purposes, and His divine actions through humans (Anderson 137). Yet this righteous theology of leadership responsibilities, services, and roles is put at bay when the center of ministry focus, God Himself, is lost.

Additionally, ministry matters because the church and body of Christ act as a finger, pointing to Christ, and inviting others to partake in the Gospel. The work of the body of Christ influences the general public's opinion on Christianity. The way Christians live and display the gospel greatly impacts an unbeliever's salvation and beliefs. Believers are called to "enflesh the Person of the Holy Spirit and the truth of God in their lives and to communicate the gospel within human culture" (Anderson 134). Even in The Great Commission, Jesus tells His followers to go and make disciples of all nations under the Gospel. Jesus states, "'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen" (*NKJV*, Matt. 28.19-20). Therefore,

ministry is important because it is the primary outlet for gathering those from the world into the faith.

Ministry also involves the sacrificial act of loving, serving, and suffering for others. Every good leader chosen by God in the Bible was called to obey the greatest commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (*NKJV*, Deut. 6.5). That was the sole focus of priests, prophets, and kings. Loving and serving the Lord is what leaders in ministry today are commanded to do as well. Then holding fast to the Lord as a leader’s sole value and focus will enable those in ministry to better love, serve, and suffer for others. Truly understanding where a leader’s treasure lies and what the Christian values are assists in understanding relations between other believers, life, and ministry as a whole (Anderson 139). Above all else, ministry is self-denying and sacrificial by nature in highlighting the necessity of service. Loving God by serving others is not an easy task, but it is absolutely necessary in gathering individuals towards the Lord. While it does require self-denial and sacrifice on the part of those in ministry, leaders should not lose heart.

This is how ministry works: God’s love is displayed in Jesus, Christ’s love is shown in His people, the outpour of love is in service and ministry, and now others get to partake in this love. The Lord uses the lives of faithful leaders and followers to grow His grandiose ministry of the Gospel message. Ultimately, ministry is derived from the love of God serving as the center of which all else revolves. Radical change and revival among Christian ministries are the results of remaining firm in a common theology with God at the center, rooted in biblical revelation, and rooted in modern-day relevance (Anderson 139). Yet, it is unfortunate that many ministries today dash off this center of gravity, spin into a downward series of sin, and eventually ministry failure.

The main catalyst for failure in Christian ministry and leadership is when the focus of Christ is lost. While there are several venues for ministry failure, there is one common denominator that causes ministries to indefinitely fall. This is when Jesus loses His rightful place at the center of a leader's heart and in a ministry. Because the root of every mistake is this initial mistake of taking Christ's place (Kraft 19). As with all other products of the fall, the root of ministry failure is traced back to sin and human depravity. And sin involves becoming creature-centered rather than God-centered. The issues arise when failures are found to be rooted deep in the heart. The only way to solve this is by winning the battle on the inside. In other words, "fighting sin at the deepest level of your heart is absolutely critical" to keeping a clear conscience for Christ (MacArthur). When the rightful place of Christ at the heart of ministry is replaced with idols of self, others, or other fickle things this is where the problem begins. While there are several factors of ministry failure, there is one problem with the root from which these 'withering branches' of sin stem from. This paper will discuss two broad categories that branches of sin fall under which are unrealistic expectations and pride.

Failure is when the hearts of those in ministry, as well as the recipients of service, are not aligned with the Lord's heart. This brings us to the first category: Keeping unrealistic expectations. This is a common demeanor of failure, where many leaders can eventually become discouraged. Leaders need to constantly be reminded that God is the Lord of harvest, not any human being, act, or action plan. As Kraft states, "For me that means he is the Lord of results! Isn't that what harvest is all about- results? The Lord has his timetable. Nothing is impossible for him" (Kraft 35). Too often, we find leaders approach their positions with a kind of selfishness to 'build their numbers' and expand their ministries. Humans are tempted to take control of situations and do everything within their meager amount of power not only in the context of the

church but in everyday life situations as well. Ultimately, the Lord oversees outcomes (MacArthur). It is not up to humans to change and forcefully develop results according to their expectations and perspectives, all control rightfully belongs to God and God alone.

The next board category of ministry failure is when the issue of pride causes leaders to become corrupt with selfish gain or desires. Pride is often found to be a driving cause for the unraveling of ministries and the unfortunate fall of most leaders (Kraft 37). The Christian life is called towards a mindset of humility and unselfishness, even abandoned focus on the Lord God. John Piper, a teacher of the Word of God shares five major, common failures in ministry: failing to listen to God, failing to have a heart for the glory of God, turning aside from the ways of God, showing partiality in teaching, and causing many to stumble (Piper). The leadership role in churches, ministries, and large Christian organizations should not be taken lightly. Leaders are quite literally dealing with another's salvation by presenting the Gospel in a righteous, holy, and acceptable way. Yet, the self-confidence of pride is often mistaken with God-confidence (Kraft 40). The Gospel is not the people's story, it is God's!

When a ministry is not planted alongside the River of Life it will not flourish or produce meaningful fruit. Psalm 1 describes a person of God who continually meditates on the Scriptures, who seeks to gaze and look upon the glorious face of God rather than his selfish perspective: "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (ESV Psalm 1.2-3). Those found in ministry should be "ministers of the word; and it shows that they can fail miserably and grievously and that they can succeed gloriously" (Piper). Leaders will be judged with greater strictness, for they are held accountable for the lives of those they minister to. It is important to remember Christ is the head of the

church; He is everything while we are not. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1.17-18 about the preeminence of Christ, “And He [Christ] is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.”

Along with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a leader’s main defense in combating ministry failure is perpetually placing Christ at the center. The Person of God is “at the very center of the day-to-day practice of the Christian life” (Cunningham 126). As Christians, leaders are urged to grow as much as possible into the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Furthermore, a ministry’s worship, preaching, and church order should be characterized by the triune God who brings multiplicity and unity into these leadership settings.

The answer to avoiding ministry failure is found in God’s Word; most especially, in the Pastoral Epistles. Just as this paper has emphasized the importance of keeping Christ at the center, this involves remaining rooted in the Scriptures. The Bible is a believer’s ultimate guide for every venue of life. Therefore, we turn to 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, which are practical, principal letters from Paul to leaders in the faith who were assigned the task of running a ministry. While this paper will not dive into the depths of these Pastoral Epistles, their core message remains the same. The core message of each of these Epistles is remaining passionate in Christ and firm in sound doctrine. In 2 Timothy 4.1-2, “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom. Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (*NKJV*). And in Titus 2.1, “But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (*NKJV*).

The biblical concept of remaining vertically focused, with a ministry's sole gaze on God, is a truth that involves loving and serving Him alone. God is the archetype, origin, and goal that drives the lives of those in leadership to resemble Himself better (Cunningham 136). Jesus Christ is the prime example or template of what true leadership looks like. The Holy Spirit enables and guides leaders in their respective ministries. Begin approaching leadership by following the first command to love and worship God alone, only then will all else fall into place. Jesus, as the ultimate servant leader is the prime example of serving the mission and serving those in the mission with Himself (Ajayi 55). The pillar of Jesus' unique style of leadership was being sacrificial in nature, humility, mentorship, vision, and service-oriented (Ajayi 59). These pillars of Christ's ministry are crucial to understanding the Christian ministry of today.

When a ministry's focus is on loving and worshiping God alone, then leaders learn to have a healthy horizontal focus on the entire body of Christ. Ministry according to the Bible: Christ is at the head, the focus and gaze are placed upward toward the heavenly, and God's people are interlinked together to make the body. This style of Jesus' leadership, as the Head of the church, allows the entire body of Christ to adopt, apply, and live it out appropriately (Ajayi 61). When this issue is resolved, other branches of mistakes that stem from the root of sin will be resolved and cut off. While this paper does not cover the entirety of ministry failures, mistakes, sins, and unresolved issues found in the church, it has uncovered the root of these failures: the focus on God or self which furthermore drives its consequent failure or success.

May the entire body of Christ and the ministries that stem from this body be continually reminded of Christ Jesus who is the head of the church, the High Priest, the ultimate Prophet, and the King of all kings. While several details and factors cause ministry failure, ultimately, the issue begins when Christ is removed from His place at the center. Furthermore, the success or

failure of a ministry is essentially according to the Lord's will and His hand working in the situation. We can submit to God's sovereign will by allowing the driving force of a ministry and a church to have a vertical focus on God and a horizontal perspective on surrounding neighbors, brethren, and community. Let us not waste time sowing into empty ministries that are void of God Himself. Instead, let us embrace Christ and guard ourselves against sin which threatens to ensnare the leadership and people within ministry. The task that must be obeyed is keeping Christ, His Word, and Scripture at the heart of a ministry for, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17 NKJV).

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