

*“With biblical insight, refreshing realism, and faith-fueled hope, Brian and James coach us pastors into a lifetime of perseverance and resilience as we negotiate the minefields of pastoral ministry. I benefited from the deep wisdom of these pages and commend this book to every fellow pastor.”*

**Dane Ortlund**, Author, *Gentle and Lowly*  
Senior Pastor, Naperville Presbyterian Church

*“Croft and Carroll have provided a very important text for those either in church leadership or aspiring toward it. With biblical depth and practical wisdom, they lay out a model for developing pastors and carrying out the ministry with a Word-centered, theologically driven methodology. This kind of principled leadership will always run longer, better, and farther than personality-driven pragmatism. Pastoral perseverance is a great need today, and I pray that this book will help toward this end.”*

**Tony Merida**, Author, *Love Your Church*  
Pastor, Imago Dei Church, Raleigh, NC

*“How do pastors break the trend of short pastorates and short ministries? It takes pastoral perseverance to continue through the rigors of ministry. Brian Croft and James Carroll in Pastoral Perseverance: Helping pastors stay, endure, and thrive provide a well-thought-out roadmap toward pastoral perseverance. Avoiding cliché-type advice, they face the barriers to perseverance with biblical answers applied in the crucible of real-life ministry. I finished the book encouraged and refreshed, with new insight to press on in ministry. Pastors, read this book to put wind in your pastoral sails. Church members, read this book to know how to better serve your pastors.”*

**Phil A. Newton**, PhD, Retired pastor  
Author, *40 Questions About Pastoral Ministry*  
Director of Pastoral Care & Mentoring for the Pillar Network

*“If you’re called to ministry, be careful. You’re in for a rough go of it mentally, physically, and spiritually. It’s always tempting to unplug, either by throwing in the towel and quitting or by becoming a robot just going through the motions. Brian Croft and James Carroll argue there’s a better way – the path of Jesus, the faithful shepherd who didn’t run away and flee when he saw the wolf coming. Stick with Jesus and his word, counsel brothers Croft and Carroll. Their book is no glib cliché-ridden formula for success, but the transparent record of their own mistakes and failures transformed by the faithfulness of a very gracious God who always keeps his promises.”*

**Harold L. Senkbeil**

Author, *The Care of Souls*

*“As disinterest towards the church increases, pastors will be pressed to find wise guidance and godly motivation for shepherding. Well acquainted with the challenges of ministry, Croft and Carroll offer a biblical, systematic, and wise treatment of pastoral perseverance. But they also address the heart, urging pastors not only to preach the gospel of grace but to imbibe in it. Here is a needed guide for pastors in our times.”*

**Jonathan Dodson**

Author, *The Unwavering Pastor*

Founder of [gcdiscipleship.com](http://gcdiscipleship.com)

# PASTORAL PERSEVERANCE

HELPING PASTORS STAY,  
ENDURE, AND THRIVE

BRIAN CROFT  
& JAMES CARROLL



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# INTRODUCTION

We are nearing the precipice of a crisis. If pastors continue leaving the ministry in droves as they are, the church will face a vacuum of leadership in the next generation. Recent statistics reveal that 50% of current pastors in America will exit the ministry in five years, and a staggering 80% will depart in ten years.<sup>1</sup> But we might not be waiting that long for a watershed as 42% of pastors considered quitting in 2022.<sup>2</sup> These statistics reveal one of the primary factors contributing to the closure of approximately 5,000 churches in the U.S. each year. Once again, evangelicals could well be heading toward a climactic moment as pastors resign en masse and sheep are left wandering. While observers and commentators speculate as to why these trends exist, supposed experts present a wide variety of solutions for reversing them. The tragedy is that many of these so-called “solutions” only serve to compound the problem because they sidestep the heart of the real issue while inadvertently contributing to it. Consider two examples.

The first of these is pragmatism, which seems to have been the most popular answer to any church problem in the last 100 years. This response surely predates the twentieth century, but the record of its proliferation in recent years is stunning. Pragmatism is a philosophical theory that determines value and

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<sup>1</sup> Research done by Soul Shepherd Institute.

<sup>2</sup> “Pastors Share Top Reasons They’ve Considered Quitting Ministry in the Past Year” (Barna Group, April 27, 2022); <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/> (accessed January 31, 2023).

truth by observing what works or by what achieves a particular end. More than mere pragmatic thinking that pursues efficiency and effectiveness, this ideology is beholden to outcomes regardless of the cost or sacrifices involved in achieving them. As such, it rejects the notion that the Bible is sufficient for informing and guiding us on how to live faithfully in the world. While proponents of pragmatism in the church will almost always acknowledge the Bible as *a* source of truth, they will refuse to accept it as the primary or sufficient one in matters of practice. Instead, a pragmatist holds that objective reality is found on the basis of observable results. Whatever works must be right or true. Theology, or what we believe about God, necessarily takes a back seat to successful methodology.

Living this way can be dangerous in many aspects of life because it's so easy to confuse correlation and causation. Starvation diets avoid obesity and produce smaller physical bodies, but they fail to promote long-term health and ultimately will lead to death. Even worse, adopting this approach with regard to spiritual matters is eternally destructive, both to individuals and to a church. Pragmatism will inevitably lead Christians to pursue shortcuts in their spiritual progress, such as a legalistic religion in place of heart transformation through spiritual discipline. Likewise, pastors and church leaders who hold this commitment will employ growth strategies and techniques from secular organizations to yield faster results or to meet superficial goals like numeric increase. Biblical exhortations for faithful ministry are replaced by faddish, cultural trends as the foundation for building the church. The driving force becomes what will produce measurable outcomes. As you can imagine, the product is a church established on entertainment, consumerism, and flashy programs with spiritually shallow members. The pastors and church leaders often achieve their

goal of attracting bigger crowds and more members to the detriment of everyone's spiritual well-being, including their own. The façade will crumble, leaving despondent pastors struggling in its wake.

A second response to the growing problem comes in the form of personality-driven pastoral leadership. Of course, spiritual, servant leadership is a necessary function in any organization, and a biblically required aspect of a local church. However, this approach stretches the concept of leadership to a grossly unhelpful level by prizing the leader himself over and against his ministry of the word and his faithful care of souls. Feeding off the leader's magnetism, this solution relies on a winsome and clever persona instead of valuing Christ-like character qualities like humility, integrity, and godliness. Rather than requiring the leader to spend his time and talent to fulfill a self-sacrificing, Christ-honoring ministry in shepherding God's people, this paradigm elevates the leader above the people, making him the epicenter and main attraction. Consequently, this approach creates a CEO, top-down structure of leadership that relies too heavily on one person and de-emphasizes the power of God in the gospel through a biblical model of shared ministry.

Capable leaders may shoulder the burden well for a time, and the church may even enjoy a thriving season of numeric growth. However, the bubble will inevitably burst. Unfortunately, many times the leader collapses in burnout under the weight of expectations and pressure, or he spirals into sin leading to disqualification because his charisma outpaces his character. Other times the church implodes from controversy because of a lack of broad, stable leadership. Regardless of the specific brand of dysfunction that characterizes the downfall, this approach is untenable at best and ungodly at worst. Even when the church

experiences apparent success, glory is given to the human leader instead of God.

The net result, then, of either pragmatism or of the elevation of leadership personalities is a church that is weaker than it appears and a pastor who is simultaneously weighed down and propped up by worldly expectations. While they may defy our original statistics in the short term, they are destined to contribute to them in the long term.

The harm from implementing these destructive strategies extends well beyond the churches that formally embrace them. These techniques crush the soul of the average pastor who ministers in the shadow of the false expectations such approaches produce. Ordinary pastors labor in the trenches, rightly trusting in the Lord's timing and fighting to keep their eye on the goal of faithfulness instead of numeric growth. Unfortunately, the awareness of these seemingly successful models, and others like them, can tempt pastors away from contentment in serving God and shepherding souls toward the more glamorous role of business-like CEO. Others will fall into sinful self-pity and despondency as they watch enviously as others "succeed" while they struggle to gain traction in helping others make true spiritual progress. While these pastors are culpable for their sinful responses, we must acknowledge the tempting environment created by these so-called "solutions." In addition, these toxic tendencies combine with most pastors' general lack of knowledge and training in self-care to yield a burn-out rate represented in the aforementioned stats. As a result, pastoral perseverance becomes an unobtainable reality for most, regardless of the effort, education, and commitment of a pastor.

Nevertheless, hope is not lost! God desires that pastors persevere in their assigned ministry fields, and he has provided the necessary resources to make it happen. This biblical principle



does not mean every pastor will serve only one flock or at only one ministry post, as God providentially guides each one according to his eternal purposes. We can, however, reasonably conclude from specific biblical texts that staying, enduring, and thriving over the long-haul ought to be the rule and not the exception. The growing tide of pastors burning out or abandoning their ministry calls into question how many are truly fulfilling their God-appointed mission and finishing their race well.

Thankfully, God not only desires pastoral perseverance, but has planned and provided for it. By God's grace we can seek to build healthy, vibrant churches that rely on the Spirit as pastors are freed to "preach the word . . . in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). Church members can be well cared for both physically and spiritually as pastors are encouraged to "shepherd the flock . . . among you" (1 Pet. 5:2), grounded in the conviction that pastors will "give an account" to Jesus for every soul under their care (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). This timeless solution results in a local church still led well and organized efficiently without the pastor losing sight of his calling to take heed to himself (Acts 20:28), to be a servant like Jesus (Mark 10:43–45), and to be an example of that service to his flock (1 Pet. 5:3).

In search of God's plan for every pastor that leads to his and the church's thriving, we move away from the lure of these popular modern strategies and to the Scripture. This approach will equip a man who has been saved by the blood of Christ and called to this noble calling of pastoring God's flock. He will be prepared for longevity regardless of his gifting, personality, or education. All this will be through the power of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God, the blessing of God's people, and the building of God's church.

This book explores that divine plan and how it applies to every pastor who desires to persevere and finish

well in his work. We will argue that he must embrace six core principles:

- A need to qualify
- A call to take heed
- A conviction to shepherd
- An urgency to preach
- A tenacity to suffer
- A resolve to die

These six areas draw upon some of the most significant passages in the New Testament related to pastoral ministry. They show how this biblical teaching shapes the call, conviction, and role of those appointed by the Chief Shepherd to care for his people. We will consider the basic meaning and thrust of each passage, interact with its ongoing significance, and share our own testimonies—both the good and the bad—related to it.

These passages paint a true and sober portrait of this grueling and joyful work rather than the glamorous one imagined by so many in our day. As Bonhoeffer famously wrote, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, we are not surprised to find that God’s plan for his under-shepherds is one of suffering, sacrifice, and service to others that often bears more eternal than temporal fruit. Yet for those divinely called by God to this pastoral work, it stirs the soul bringing joy and purpose unlike anything else in this world. We are praying that God will allow this book to bring you a proper understanding of this plan and to use it to set your expectations and prepare you for what is coming—so that he will ultimately empower you by his Spirit to persevere.

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3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 99.

# A NEED TO QUALIFY

*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*

(1 Tim. 3:1)

A great need emerged early in my (Brian) pastoral ministry. The church I was serving saw steady growth in the first few years, including attracting several students from a local seminary. As I built relationships with these young men pursuing pastoral ministry, I found they had many wonderful qualities. Each one of them was genuinely devoted to God, had been transformed by the gospel, loved the local church, and sensed God's leading to pursue full-time vocational ministry. As a result, each one had come to seminary with the expectation that they would be trained and equipped for this important work with eternal impact.

As I grew to know these young men, however, I was concerned by some common elements in their stories. Most had come to the seminary without any kind of congregational affirmation from a local church. Despite the seminary requiring this for admission, I learned after some investigation that, in most cases, their church's affirmation amounted to little more than a letter of approval for them to attend the school. None had experienced a corporate affirmation of their gifts for the ministry, and none had been tested or trained by the leadership and congregation in their respective church. They had permission to attend, but not the affirmation and support

from the local body of believers as a man gifted and called by God to shepherd and lead his people.

I also discovered these students—in most cases reflecting the view of their respective home churches—expected the seminary would fulfill this role by affirming and preparing them for the duties, challenges, and struggles of ministry. But as Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has stated on more than one occasion, this is not the role or responsibility of a seminary:

*I emphatically believe that the best and most proper place for the education and preparation of pastors is in the local church. We should be ashamed that churches fail miserably in their responsibility to train future pastors. Established pastors should be ashamed if they are not pouring themselves into the lives of young men whom God has called into the teaching and leadership ministry of the church.<sup>1</sup>*

In other words, seminaries do not and should not shoulder the responsibility for selecting, testing, and affirming men for ministerial calling. Instead, this task falls under the authority of the local church, who is ultimately accountable to God for it. Their failure to do so has placed unnecessary pressure on seminaries and Bible colleges, led to widespread confusion among men seeking a pastoral calling for ministry, and fostered a neglect in the local church of a divine mandate to prepare the next generation of shepherds for God's flock.

Charles Bridges (1794–1869) has provided arguably the best work on the responsibility and the process of assessing men for ministry. In his seminal book *The Christian Ministry*, Bridges

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Adrian Warnock's blog post, "Interview with Dr. Albert Mohler" (November 8, 2006); <http://adrianwarnock.com/2006/11/interview-dr-albert-mohler-radio-host.htm> (accessed October 15, 2013).

places the responsibility for the determination of one's call on both the conscience of the individual and the local church to which he is committed. Bridges refers to these two aspects of calling as the internal and the external call of God:

*The external call is a commission received from and recognized by the Church . . . not indeed qualifying the Minister, but accrediting him, whom God had internally and suitably qualified. This call communicates therefore only official authority. The internal call is the voice and power of the Holy Ghost, directing the will and the judgment, and conveying personal qualifications. Both calls, however—though essentially distinct in their character and source—are indispensable for the exercise of our commission.<sup>2</sup>*

Bridges argues that an individual must receive inward leading from God to know he is truly set aside by him to serve in the ministry. This inner sense is recognized through a God-given desire to do ministry combined with a conviction that he has been gifted and empowered by God's Spirit for this work. In addition to, and consistent with the internal call, an individual must possess an external call. This is the vital affirmation from a local church that he does indeed possess the gifts and godly character suitable for a Christian minister. Many other godly men throughout church history have agreed that both the internal and external calls are necessary for a man to serve in pastoral ministry.

A local church, then, ought to think biblically before acting to endorse a man's pursuit of ministry. Sadly, many churches today base their affirmation on nothing more than a given man's sense of *internal calling*—that is, his subjective, and unfalsifiable, perception of a desire and giftedness to do the work—or on

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry: An Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), pp. 91–92.

his charisma and the outward appearance of gifting. However, churches must instead base their approval primarily on an objective and tangible process that tests his character and gifting for ministry according to Scripture.

That leaves us to ponder the question: “What kind of man receives an external call from a local church?” The aim of this chapter is to consider, with the help of wisdom from pastors and theologians throughout church history, how the biblical qualifications for pastoral ministry should be employed to evaluate men sensing an internal calling from God. Answers are offered in light of the biblical qualifications for pastors found in 1 Timothy 3:1–7:

*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*

This well-known passage establishes the need for pastors to demonstrate that they are qualified for the work of shepherding God’s flock.<sup>3</sup> We will summarize the necessary qualities that show a man’s fitness for ministry into four broad categories.

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<sup>3</sup> Tit. 1:6–9 and 1 Pet. 5:1–4 are also clear, complimentary passages describing these biblical qualifications

## TRANSFORMED BY THE GOSPEL

While it should be entirely obvious, we find it important to state outright that no man is qualified to enter the sacred office of being a minister of the gospel unless he has himself been transformed by the gospel. The gospel is the message of God's plan and work to save sinners from his wrath and reconcile them to himself through the person and work of Jesus Christ—his life, death, resurrection, and ascension—and the offer of that salvation is to all who will turn from sin and trust fully in Jesus. A sinner receives this salvation as a gift of God's grace through repentance of sin and personal faith in Jesus. While it seems bizarre for a man to give his life to preaching the gospel and serving God's church without first experiencing the saving work of Christ, it is a legitimate concern. Hence, in the seventeenth century, Richard Baxter began his celebrated book, *The Reformed Pastor*, in this way:

*Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Saviour, your own hearts should neglect him and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits. Take heed to yourselves, lest you perish, while you call upon others to take heed of perishing; and lest you famish yourselves while you prepare food for them. . . . Many have warned others that they come not to that place of torment, while yet they hastened to it themselves; many a preacher is now in hell, who hath a hundred times called upon his hearers to use the utmost care and diligence to escape it.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. William Brown (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), p. 53.

Baxter's warning should resonate with those of us who love Christ and his church just as much in the twenty-first century. When local churches fail to discern whether a man is still in darkness, enslaved to sin, and in complete rebellion against God before placing him in a pastoral position, they place God's people in a dangerous position. If the man is perishing, how can he properly warn other sinners or shepherd saints?

This qualification simply cannot be assumed. If a man has not been transformed by Christ, he is not fit for pastoral ministry.

### DESIRE FOR THE WORK

The Apostle Paul instructs Timothy, his young protégé in the faith, by writing, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer [pastor], he desires a noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1). The great nineteenth-century Baptist, Charles Spurgeon, lectured young men preparing for the ministry in this way, "The first sign of the heavenly calling is an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work."<sup>5</sup> There must be a strong, unquenchable desire to do the work of a pastor—a desire to preach God's word, shepherd God's people, evangelize the lost, disciple the spiritually immature, and serve the local church.

Spurgeon continues that this divine aspiration becomes evident through an urgency to do nothing else:

*If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth, let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fullness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants.*

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<sup>5</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), p. 26.