

# Dangerous Calling



**Paul  
David  
Tripp**

**Confronting the Unique  
Challenges of Pastoral Ministry**

“Paul David Tripp’s *Dangerous Calling* is a timely, transformative message for every pastor navigating the unique challenges of pastoral ministry. As a mentee of Tripp for nearly twenty years, I know him to be a true pastor of pastors. *Dangerous Calling* is as challenging as it is courageous, and it brings to light, with biblical clarity and grace, the real issues pastors face. Tripp digs deep, urging pastors to examine their hearts and to embrace their calling with renewed humility and strength. Pastors, leaders, and church members, this book will sharpen, stretch, strengthen, and point you to our Savior Jesus. It’s not just a book to read—it’s a call to examine, refresh, and deepen your ministry.”

**Doug Logan Jr.**, President, Grimké Seminary and College; Council Member, The Gospel Coalition; author, *The Soul-Winning Church* and *The Least, the Last, and the Lost*

“With the heart of a shepherd, the wisdom of a counselor, and the conviction of a prophet, Paul David Tripp helps pastors to embrace their true calling and avoid the perils of ministry. This book is full of biblical principles and real-world insights. It’s a field manual for pastoral perseverance.”

**Mark Vroegop**, President, The Gospel Coalition; author, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*

“Do not read this book—unless you’re ready to go to work on your heart. You will taste pleasing pain and be all the better for many bruises. You will run a gauntlet. No serious reader will emerge unscathed. Some may get knocked out cold—and spend the rest of their lives grateful for the timely humbling. These chapters will work you over, and you may freshly thank God for his indwelling Spirit, without whom you’d be a goner and wouldn’t have made it till now. Beware, Paul Tripp asks a lot of his reader: readiness to be bruised, willingness to be cut, eagerness to be sifted. Lance a boil, and you’ll feel the sting, and with it the joy of relief. Again and again, I felt the sting, and with it the joy of exposure and the hope of healing and preventative medicine. Just make sure not to proceed too quickly. Take your time. Read at the pace of lifelong heart-change.”

**David Mathis**, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, Desiring God; Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

“*Dangerous Calling* is a dangerous book to read. It is also a book every person in ministry should read. It will cut you to the heart and bring massive conviction if you read it with humility and ask God to expose sins deeply hidden in your soul. It cuts, but it also provides biblical remedies for healing. I would love to put this book in the hands of every seminarian who walks on my campus.”

**Daniel L. Akin**, President, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Pastoral ministry is a dangerous calling, and this is a dangerous book. It will not leave you unchanged. Pastors need pastors, and by God’s grace, every page of this book will minister to your heart, your marriage, your family, and the people you serve—in ways you never thought you needed it. This book digs down into the inner recesses of our hearts to reveal our greatest idols and point to our greatest needs. It will make you joyfully uncomfortable and, by God’s grace, will bring you to your knees in tears of thankfulness only to help lift your weary head to fix your renewed gaze on Christ. This book is like a mirror that redirects our hearts’ reflections from ourselves to Christ. If this book were a sermon, it would be the most weighty and refreshing sermon you’ve ever needed to hear. My sincere hope is that this book would be translated into multiple languages, become required reading in seminaries, and be distributed to Christians everywhere who know they’re called to serve God and others with the gifts with which the Holy Spirit has equipped them.”

**Burk Parsons**, Senior Pastor, Saint Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford, Florida;  
Editor, *Tabletalk*

“Our wives, children, and the members we serve will have a new husband, father, and pastor if we follow Tripp’s example and give a humble and honest reading of this book—one with our inner Pharisee and scribe turned off. We will see the need to save ourselves from a very dark and destructive force working against pastors: undiagnosed pastoral self-righteousness. With much wisdom and conviction, Tripp’s *Dangerous Calling* preaches the gospel of grace to the men who are preaching the gospel Sunday after Sunday to everyone but themselves.”

**Eric C. Redmond**, Professor of Bible, Moody Bible Institute; Associate Pastor of Preaching and Teaching, Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, Illinois

“Few would regard a pastor’s role as a dangerous calling, but few people are as qualified and insightful as Paul Tripp to penetrate the snares and potential pitfalls associated with pastoral ministry. Fewer still would prescribe such gospel based and local church rooted remedies. This excellent volume should be read, reread, and applied.”

**Terry Virgo**, Founder, Newfrontiers

**DANGEROUS  
CALLING**

## **Other Crossway Books by Paul David Tripp**

*A Quest for More: Living for Something Bigger Than You*

*Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide for Parenting Teens (Resources for Changing Lives)*

*Awe: Why It Matters for Everything We Think, Say, and Do*

*Broken-Down House: Living Productively in a World Gone Bad*

*Come, Let Us Adore Him: A Daily Advent Devotional*

*Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*

*Forever: Why You Can't Live without It*

*Grief: Finding Hope Again*

*How People Change (with Timothy S. Lane)*

*Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change (Resources for Changing Lives)*

*Journey to the Cross: A 40-Day Lenten Devotional*

*Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church*

*Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God*

*My Heart Cries Out: Gospel Meditations for Everyday Life*

*New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional*

*Parenting: 14 Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family*

*Redeeming Money: How God Reveals and Reorients Our Hearts*

*Sex in a Broken World: How Christ Redeems What Sin Distorts*

*Shelter in the Time of Storm: Meditations on God and Trouble*

*Suffering: Eternity Makes a Difference (Resources for Changing Lives)*

*Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*

*Teens and Sex: How Should We Teach Them? (Resources for Changing Lives)*

*War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles (Resources for Changing Lives)*

*Whiter Than Snow: Meditations on Sin and Mercy*

# **DANGEROUS CALLING**

**CONFRONTING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF  
PASTORAL MINISTRY**

**PAUL DAVID TRIPP**

 **CROSSWAY®**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*

Copyright © 2012, 2025 by Paul David Tripp

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design and illustration: David Fassett

First printing 2012

Reprinted in paperback 2015

Reprinted with new cover and study questions 2025

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated in whole or in part into any other language.

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

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

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

---

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Tripp, Paul David, 1950-

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

Includes bibliographical references and index.

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

1. Pastoral theology. I. Title.

BV4011.3. T75 2012

253—dc23

2012015795

---

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

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

To all the pastors who have cared for me.  
The imprint of your hands is still on me,  
and I am grateful.



# CONTENTS

Introduction	11
<b>PART 1</b>	
<b>EXAMINING PASTORAL CULTURE</b>	
1 Headed for Disaster	17
2 Again and Again	29
3 Big Theological Brains and Heart Disease	41
4 More Than Knowledge and Skill	57
5 Joints and Ligaments	69
6 The Missing Community	83
7 War Zones	97
<b>PART 2</b>	
<b>THE DANGER OF LOSING YOUR AWE (FORGETTING WHO GOD IS)</b>	
8 Familiarity	113
9 Dirty Secrets	125
10 Mediocrity	137
11 Between the Already and the Not Yet	151
<b>PART 3</b>	
<b>THE DANGER OF ARRIVAL (FORGETTING WHO YOU ARE)</b>	
12 Self-Glory	167
13 Always Preparing	183
14 Separation	199
15 So, What Now?	213
Study Questions	225
General Index	233
Scripture Index	235



# INTRODUCTION

Books are penned for many reasons. There are *explanatory books* written to help you understand something that has left many people confused. There are *encouraging books* written to speak into the discouragement of life in a fallen world and give you motivating hope and a reason to continue. There are *instructive books* that help you know how to do something that you need to do but simply don't know how. There are *exegetical books* that take apart a portion of God's Word, helping you to understand it and to live in light of its truths. There are ways in which the book you are about to read has elements of all four of these types of books, yet that isn't meant to be its main focus.

This is a *diagnostic book*. It is written to help you take an honest look at yourself in the heart- and life-exposing mirror of the Word of God—to see things that are wrong and need correcting and to help you place yourself once again under the healing and transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Of the books that I have written, I found this one the hardest to write, not because of the writing process itself but because its pages expose the ugliness of my own heart and display how desperate my need for grace continues to be. It is not an exaggeration to say that I wept my way through writing some of the chapters. There were moments when I would go upstairs to share what I had written with Luella, the tears of conviction would come, and I would be unable to continue. But as I did my writing, it did not leave me feeling discouraged or hopeless but, rather, with a deeper hope in the gospel and a greater joy in ministry than I think I have ever known.

This book is written to confront the issue of the often unhealthy

shape of pastoral culture and to put on the table the temptations that are either unique to or intensified by pastoral ministry. This is a book of warning that calls you to humble self-reflection and change. It is written to make you uncomfortable, to motivate you toward change. At points it may make you angry, but I am convinced that the content of this book is a reflection of what God has called me to do. Perhaps we have become too comfortable. Perhaps we have quit examining ourselves and the culture that surrounds those of us who have been called to ministry in the local church. I think that, more than any other book I have written, I wrote this book because I could not live with not writing it. And I have launched myself on a ministry career direction to get help for pastors who have lost their way.

I guess that means I am a pastor who is so bold as to assume that you, like me, need pastoring and, at least in the pages of this book, I will attempt to pastor you. I do that knowing that every warning I put before you I need myself, and each dose of the medicine of grace I give you I need to take as well.

It is the gospel of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that makes possible the honesty that is on the pages of this book. If all the sin, weaknesses, and failures that this book addresses have been fully covered by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, then we can break the silence, walk out into the light, and face the things that God is calling us to face. My prayer is that this book would get a conversation started that will never stop and that it will lead to changes that have been needed for way too long.

I would simply ask that as you read, you deactivate your inner lawyer and consider with an open heart. Be so bold as to ask God to reveal in you what needs to be revealed and to give you the grace to address what needs to be addressed. And as you do these things, celebrate the grace that has been lavished on you that frees you from the burden of having to pump up your righteousness to yourself and to parade it before others. Because your standing before your Lord is based on the righteousness of Another, you can stand before a holy God and admit to your darkest secrets and own your deepest failures

and be unafraid, knowing that because of the work of Jesus, the one to whom you confess will not turn his back on you but will move toward you with forgiving, rescuing, transforming, empowering, and delivering grace. This is the good news not only that makes this book possible but also that you and I need to preach to ourselves and to one another day after day.

Paul David Tripp  
April 10, 2012



**PART 1**

EXAMINING PASTORAL  
CULTURE



## CHAPTER ONE

# HEADED FOR DISASTER

I was a very angry man. The problem was that I didn't know I was an angry man. I thought that no one had a more accurate view of me than I did, and I simply didn't see myself as angry. No, I didn't think I was perfect, and, yes, I knew I needed others in my life, but I lived as though I didn't. Luella, my dear wife, was very faithful over a long period of time in bringing my anger to me. She did it with a combination of firmness and grace. She never yelled at me, she never called me names, and she never called me out in front of our children. Again and again she let me know that my anger was neither justified nor acceptable. I look back and marvel at the character she showed during those very difficult days. I found out later that Luella had already been putting together her escape plan. No, she wasn't planning to divorce me; she just knew that the cycle of anger needed to be broken so that we could be reconciled and live in the kind of relationship that God had designed marriage to be.

When Luella would approach me with yet another instance of this anger, I would always do the same thing. I would wrap my robes of righteousness around me, activate my inner lawyer, and remind her once again of what a great husband she had. I would go through my well-rehearsed and rather long list of all the things I did for her, all the ways I made her life easier. I'm a domestic guy. I don't mind doing things around the house. I love to cook. So I had a lot of things I could point to that assured me I was not the guy she was saying I was and that I hoped would convince her that she was wrong as well. But Luella wasn't convinced. She seemed more and more convinced that she was

right and that change had to take place. I just wanted her to leave me alone, but she wouldn't, and frankly that made me angry.

In ways that scare me now as I look back on them, I was a man headed for disaster. I was in the middle of destroying my marriage and my ministry, and I didn't have a clue. There was a huge disconnect between my private persona and my public ministry life. The irritable and impatient man at home was a very different guy from the gracious and patient pastor our congregation saw in those public ministry and worship settings where they encountered me most. I was increasingly comfortable with things that should have haunted and convicted me. I was okay with things as they were. I felt little need for change. I just didn't see the spiritual schizophrenia that personal ministry life had become. Things would not stay the same, if for no other reason than that I was and am a son of a relentless Redeemer, who will not forsake the work of his hands until that work is complete. Little did I know that he would expose my heart in a powerful moment of rescuing grace. I was blind and progressively hardening and happily going about the work of a growing local church and Christian school.

When being confronted, I told Luella numerous times that I thought she was just a garden-variety, discontented wife. I told her that I would pray for her. That helped and comforted her! Actually, it did the opposite—it depicted two things to her. It alerted her to how blind I was, and it reminded her that she had no power whatsoever to change me. The change that was needed would take an act of grace. Luella was confronted with the fact that she would never be anything more than a tool in God's powerful hands.

But God blessed Luella with the perseverant faith that she needed to keep coming to me, often in the middle of very discouraging moments. What I am about to share next is both humbling and embarrassing. On one occasion, as Luella was confronting me with yet another instance of my anger, I got on a roll and actually said these deeply humble words: "Ninety-five percent of the women in our church would love to be married to a man like me!" How's that for

humility? Luella very quickly informed me that she was in the 5 percent! How blind does one have to be to let a statement like mine roll out of one's lips? God was about to undo and rebuild the heart and life of this man, and I did not know I needed it and had no idea that it was coming.

My brother Tedd and I had been on a ministry training weekend and were on our way home. I never thought that a single trip up the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike could be so momentous. Tedd suggested that we try to make what we had learned over the weekend practical to our own lives. He said, "Why don't you start?" and then proceeded to ask me a series of questions. I think I will celebrate what happened next for ten million years into eternity. As Tedd asked me questions, it was as though God was ripping down curtains and I was seeing and hearing myself with accuracy for the first time. There is no way that I can overstate the significance of the work that the Holy Spirit was doing at that moment in the car through Tedd's questions.

As God opened my eyes in that moment, I was immediately broken and grieved. What I saw through Tedd's questions was so far from the view of myself that I had carried around for so many years that it was almost impossible to believe that the man I was now looking at and hearing was actually me. But it was. I couldn't believe what I saw myself doing and heard myself saying as I recounted scenarios in answer to Tedd's questions. It was a moment of pointed and powerful divine rescue, a bigger moment than I was able to grasp in the shock and emotion of the moment. I don't know if Tedd knew at the time how big this moment was, either.

I couldn't wait to get home and talk with Luella. I knew the insight I was being given was not just the product of God's using Tedd's questions; it was also the result of Luella's loving but determined faithfulness for all of those trying years. I am a man with a lively sense of humor, and I often enter the house humorously, but not this night. I was in the throes of life-altering, heart-reshaping conviction. I think Luella knew right away that something was up by the way I looked. I

asked her if we could sit down and talk, even though it was late. As we sat down I said, “I know you have been trying for a long time to get me to look at my anger, and I have been unwilling. I have always turned it back on you, but I can honestly say for the first time that I am ready to listen to you. I want to hear what you have to say.”

I’ll never forget what happened next. Luella began to cry; she told me that she loved me, and then she talked for two hours. It was in those two hours that God began the process of the radical tearing down and rebuilding of my heart. The most important word of the previous sentence is *process*. I wasn’t zapped by lightning; I didn’t instantly become an unangry man. But now I was a man with eyes, ears, and heart open. The next few months were incredibly painful. It seemed that my anger was visible everywhere I looked. At times it seemed the pain was too great to bear. That pain was the pain of grace. God was making the anger that I had denied and protected to be like vomit in my mouth. God was working to make sure that I would never go back again. I was in the middle of spiritual surgery. You see, the pain wasn’t an indication that God had withdrawn his love and grace from me. No, the opposite was true. The pain was a clear indication of God’s lavishing his love and grace on me. In this trial of conviction, I was getting what I had so often prayed for—the salvation (sanctification) of my soul.

I will never forget one particular moment that took place months after that night of conviction and rescue. I was coming down the stairs into our living room, and I saw Luella sitting with her back to me. And as I looked at her, it hit me that I couldn’t remember the last time I had felt that old ugly anger toward her. Now, I want to be candid here. I’m not saying that I had risen to a point in my sanctification where I found it impossible to experience a flash of impatience or irritation; but that that old, life-dominating anger was gone. Praise God! I walked up behind Luella and put my hands on her shoulders, and she put her head back and looked up at me, and I said to her, “You know, I’m not angry at you anymore.” Together we laughed and cried at the same time at the beauty of what God had done.

## **NOT ALONE**

I wish I could say that my pastoral experience is unique, but I have come to learn in my ministry travels to hundreds of churches around the world that, sadly, it is not. Sure, the details are unique, but the same disconnect between the public pastoral persona and the private man is there in many, many pastors' lives. I have heard so many stories containing so many confessions that I have carried with me grief and concern about the state of pastoral culture in our generation. It is the burden of this concern, coupled with my knowledge and experience of transforming grace, that has driven me to write this book.

There are three underlying themes that operated in my life, which I have encountered operating in the lives of many pastors to whom I have talked. These underlying themes functioned as the mechanism of spiritual blindness in my life, and they do in the lives of countless pastors around the world. Unpacking these themes is a good way to launch us on an examination of places where pastoral culture may be less than biblical and on a consideration of temptations that are either resident in or intensified by pastoral ministry.

### **1) I LET MINISTRY DEFINE MY IDENTITY.**

It is something I have written about before, but I think it is particularly important for people in ministry to understand. I always say it this way: "No one is more influential in your life than you are, because no one talks to you more than you do." Whether you realize it or not, you are in an unending conversation with yourself, and the things you say to you about you are formative of the way that you live. You are constantly talking to yourself about your identity, your spirituality, your functionality, your emotionality, your mentality, your personality, your relationships, etc. You are constantly preaching to yourself some kind of gospel. You preach to yourself an anti-gospel of your own righteousness, power, and wisdom, or you preach to yourself the true gospel of deep spiritual need and sufficient grace. You preach to yourself an anti-gospel of aloneness and inability, or you preach to yourself the true gospel of the presence, provisions, and power of an ever-present Christ.

Smack-dab in the middle of your internal conversation is what you tell yourself about your identity. Human beings are always assigning to themselves some kind of identity. There are only two places to look. Either you will be getting your identity vertically, from who you are in Christ, or you will be shopping for it horizontally in the situations, experiences, and relationships of your daily life. This is true of everyone, but I am convinced that getting one's identity horizontally is a particular temptation for those in ministry. Part of why I was so blind to the huge disconnect between what was going on in my public ministry life and my private family life was this issue of identity.

Ministry had become my identity. No, I didn't think of myself as a child of God, in daily need of grace, in the middle of my own sanctification, still in a battle with sin, still in need of the body of Christ, and called to pastoral ministry. No, I thought of myself as a *pastor*. That's it, bottom line. The office of pastor was more than a calling and a set of God-given gifts that had been recognized by the body of Christ. "Pastor" defined me. It was me in a way that proved to be more dangerous than I would have thought. Permit me to explain the spiritual dynamics of all this.

In ways that my eyes didn't see and my heart was not yet ready to embrace, my Christianity had quit being a relationship. Yes, I knew God is my Father and that I am his child, but at street level things looked different. My faith had become a professional calling. It had become my job. My role as pastor was the way I understood myself. It shaped the way I related to God. It formed my relationships with the people in my life. My calling had become my identity, and I was in trouble, and I had no idea. I was set up for disaster, and if it hadn't been anger, it would have been something else.

It's no surprise to me that there are many bitter pastors out there, many who are socially uncomfortable, many who have messy or dysfunctional relationships at home, many who have tense relationships with staff members or lay leaders, and many who struggle with secret, unconfessed sin. Could it be that all of these struggles are potenti-

ated by the fact that we have become comfortable with looking at and defining ourselves in a way that is less than biblical? So we come to relationship with God and others being less than needy. And because we are less than needy, we are less than open to the ministry of others and to the conviction of the Spirit. This sucks the life out of the private devotional aspect of our walk with God. Tender, heartfelt worship is hard for a person who thinks of himself as having arrived. No one celebrates the presence and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ more than the person who has embraced his desperate and daily need of it. But ministry had redefined me. In ways I now find embarrassing, it told me that I was not like everyone else, that I existed in a unique category. And if I was not like everyone else, then I didn't need what everyone else needs. Now, if you had sat me down and told me all this specifically, I would have told you it was all a bunch of baloney; but it was how I acted and related.

I know I am not alone. There are many pastors who have inserted themselves into a spiritual category that doesn't exist. Like me, they think they are someone they're not. So they respond in ways that they shouldn't, and they develop habits that are spiritually dangerous. They are content with a devotional life that either doesn't exist or is constantly kidnapped by preparation. They are comfortable with living outside of or above the body of Christ. They are quick to minister but not very open to being ministered to. They have long since quit seeing themselves with accuracy and so tend not to receive well the loving confrontation of others. And they tend to carry this unique-category identity home with them and are less than humble and patient with their families.

The false identity that many of us have assigned to ourselves then structures how we see and respond to others. You are most loving, patient, kind, and gracious when you are aware that there is no truth that you could give to another that you don't desperately need yourself. You are most humble and gentle when you think that the person you are ministering to is more like you than unlike you. When you have inserted yourself into another category that tends to make you

think you have arrived, it is very easy to be judgmental and impatient. I heard a pastor unwittingly verbalize this well.

My brother Tedd and I were at a large Christian-life conference listening to a well-known pastor speak on family worship. He told stories of the zeal, discipline, and dedication of the great fathers of our faith to personal and family worship. He painted lengthy pictures of what their private and family devotions were like. I think all of us felt that it was all very convicting and discouraging. I felt the weight of the burden of the crowd as they listened. I was saying to myself, “Comfort us with grace, comfort us with grace,” but the grace never came.

On the way back to the hotel, Tedd and I rode with the speaker and another pastor, who was our driver. Our pastor driver had clearly felt the burden himself and asked the speaker a brilliant question. He said, “If a man in your congregation came to you and said, ‘Pastor, I know I’m supposed to have devotions with my family, but things are so chaotic at my house that I can barely get myself out of bed and get the child fed and off to school; I don’t know how I would ever be able to pull off devotions too’—what would you say to him?” (The following response is not made up or enhanced in any way.) The speaker answered, “I say to him, ‘I’m a pastor, which means I carry many more burdens for many more people than you do, and if I can pull off daily family worship, you should be able to do so as well.’” Maybe it was because he was with a group of pastors, but he actually said it! There was no identifying with the man’s struggle. There was no ministry of grace. Coming from a world this man didn’t understand, he laid the law on him even more heavily, as sadly I did again and again with my wife and children.

As I heard his response, I was angry, until I remembered that I had done the very same thing again and again. At home it was all too easy to mete out judgment while I was all too stingy with the giving of grace. But there was another thing operating that was even more dangerous. This unique-category identity not only defined my relationship with others but also was destroying my relationship with God.

Blind to what was going on in my heart, I was proud, unapproach-

able, defensive, and all too comfortable. I was a pastor; I didn't need what other people need. Now, I want to say again that at the conceptual, theological level, I would have argued that all of this was bunk. Being a pastor was my calling, not my identity. Child of the Most High God was my cross-purchased identity. Member of the body of Christ was my identity. Man in the middle of his own sanctification was my identity. Sinner and still in need of rescuing, transforming, empowering, and delivering grace was my identity. I didn't realize that I looked horizontally for what I had already been given in Christ and that it was producing a harvest of bad fruit in my heart, in my ministry, and in my relationships. I had let my ministry become something that it should never be (my identity); I looked to it to give me what it never could (my inner sense of well-being).

## 2) I LET BIBLICAL LITERACY AND THEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE DEFINE MY MATURITY.

This is not unrelated to the above, but it's enough of a different category to require its own attention. It is quite easy in ministry to give in to a subtle but significant redefinition of what spiritual maturity is and does. This definition has its roots in how we think about what sin is and what sin does. I think that many, many pastors carry into their pastoral ministries a false definition of maturity that is the result of the academic enculturation that tends to take place in seminary. Permit me to explain.

Since seminary tends to academize the faith, making it a world of ideas to be mastered (I will write about this at length later in this book), it is quite easy for students to buy into the belief that biblical maturity is about the precision of theological knowledge and the completeness of their biblical literacy. So seminary graduates, who are Bible and theology experts, tend to think of themselves as being mature. But it must be said that maturity is not merely something you do with your mind (although that is an important element of spiritual maturity). No, maturity is about how you live your life. It is possible to be theologically astute and be very immature. It is possible to be biblically literate and be in need of significant spiritual growth.

I was an honors graduate of a seminary. I won academic awards. I assumed I was mature and felt misunderstood and misjudged by anyone who failed to share my assessment. In fact, I saw those moments of confrontation as part of the persecution that anyone faces when he gives himself to gospel ministry. Now, the roots of this are a deep misunderstanding of what sin and grace are all about. You see, sin is not first an intellectual problem. (Yes, it does affect my intellect, as it does all parts of my functioning.) Sin is first a moral problem. It is about my rebellion against God and my quest to have for myself the glory that is due to him. Sin is not first about the breaking of an abstract set of rules. Sin is first and foremost about breaking relationship with God, and because I have broken this relationship, it is then easy and natural to rebel against God's rules. So it's not just my mind that needs to be renewed by sound biblical teaching, but my heart needs to be reclaimed by the powerful grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The reclamation of my heart is both an event (justification) and a process (sanctification). Seminary, therefore, won't solve my deepest problem—sin. It can contribute to the solution, but it may also blind me to my true condition by its tendency to redefine what maturity actually looks like. Biblical maturity is never just about what you know; it's always about how grace has employed what you have come to know to transform the way you live.

Think of Adam and Eve. They didn't disobey God because they were intellectually ignorant of God's commands. No, they knowingly stepped over God's boundaries because they quested for God's position. The spiritual war of Eden was fought on the turf of the desires of the hearts of Adam and Eve. The battle was being fought at a deeper level than mere knowledge. Consider David. He didn't claim Bathsheba as his own and plot to get rid of her husband because he was ignorant of God's prohibitions against adultery and murder. No, David did what he did because at some point he didn't care what God wanted. He was going to have what his heart desired, no matter what.

Or think what it means to be wise. There is a huge difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is an accurate under-

standing of truth. Wisdom is understanding and living in light of how that truth applies to the situations and relationships of your daily life. Knowledge is an exercise of your brain. Wisdom is the commitment of your heart that leads to transformation of your life.

Even though I didn't know it, I had walked into pastoral ministry with an unbiblical view of biblical maturity. In ways that now scare me, I thought I had arrived. I viewed myself as being way more mature than I actually was. So when Luella would lovingly and faithfully confront me that I was just being defensive, by definition I thought she was wrong. And increasingly I was convinced that she was the one with the problem. So I didn't see myself as needy, and I was not open to correction, and I would use my biblical and theological knowledge to defend myself. I was a mess, and I had no idea.

### 3) I CONFUSED MINISTRY SUCCESS WITH GOD'S ENDORSEMENT OF MY LIFESTYLE.

Pastoral ministry was exciting in many ways. The church was growing numerically, and people seemed to be growing spiritually. More and more people seemed to be committing to this vibrant spiritual community, and we saw battles of the heart taking place in people's lives. We founded a Christian school, which was growing and expanding its reputation and influence. We were beginning to identify and disciple leaders. It wasn't all rosy, and there were moments that were painful and burdensome, but I started out my days with a deep sense of privilege that God had called me to do what he had called me to do. I was leading a community of faith, and God was blessing our efforts. But I held these blessings in the wrong way. Without knowing that I was doing it, I took God's faithfulness to me, to his people, to the work of his kingdom, to his plan of redemption, and to his church as an endorsement of me. It was an "I'm one of the good guys and God is behind me all the way" perspective on my ministry, but more importantly on myself. In fact, I would say to Luella (and this is embarrassing, but important to admit), "If I'm such a bad guy, why is God blessing everything I put my hands to?" God was acting as he was not because he was endorsing my manner of living but because of his zeal for his

own glory and his faithfulness to his promises of grace for his people. And God has the authority and power to use whatever instruments he chooses in whatever way he chooses to use them. The success of a ministry is always more a picture of who God is than a statement about who the people are that he is using for his purpose. I had it all wrong. I took credit that I did not deserve for what I could not do; I made it about me, so I didn't see myself as a man headed for disaster and in deep need of the rescue of God's grace.



I was a man in need of rescuing grace, and through Luella's faithfulness and Tedd's surgical questions, God did exactly that. What about you? How do you view yourself? What are the things you regularly say to you about you? Are there subtle signs in your life that you see yourself as being different from those to whom you minister? Do you see yourself as a minister of grace in need of the same grace? Have you become comfortable with discontinuities between the gospel that you preach and the way that you live? Are there disharmonies between your public ministry persona and the details of your private life? Do you encourage a level of community in your church that you do not give yourself to? Do you fall into believing that no one has a more accurate view of you than you do? Do you use your knowledge or experience to keep confrontation at bay?

Pastor, you don't have to be afraid of what is in your heart, and you don't have to fear being known, because there is nothing in you that could ever be exposed that hasn't already been covered by the precious blood of your Savior king, Jesus.