



CHALLENGES PASTORS FACE

Overcome Common Struggles
and Thrive in Ministry

DAVID HORNER



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

David Horner, *7 Challenges Pastors Face*
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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Repackaged edition published 2019
ISBN 978-0-8010-9475-0

Previously published under the title *A Practical Guide for Life and Ministry*

Printed in the United States of America

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The Library of Congress has cataloged the original edition as follows:
Horner, David, 1952–

A practical guide for life and ministry : overcoming seven challenges pastors face / David Horner.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-9195-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Pastoral theology. I. Title.

BV4011.3.H67 2008

253'.2—dc22

2007038370

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19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my wife, Cathy,
for her support and prayers
during the years of ministry God has given us together
and her part in making this work possible.

And a word of thanks
for the diligent labors of
Diana Mattix and Jennifer Sharpe
in preparing and editing the manuscript.

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PREFACE

Back in the summer of 1998, I began working on this book. Little did I know then that the first draft would not be completed for another six years! Although I didn't realize it at the time, the Lord used the prolonged period of composition to give me plenty of up-to-date examples and illustrations of the principles and observations included in the text.

During those years, our family has grown up, and Cathy and I have now celebrated thirty years of marriage. The church I pastor, Providence Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, has undergone radical transitions. We have continued to grow both in numbers and in the character of the lives of folks throughout the congregation who have been changed by the grace of Christ. Two major anniversaries of the church, the twentieth and the twenty-fifth years, marked wonderful milestones of God's faithfulness. We planted a new church as the book was under construction, and a healthy congregation of more than three hundred members was sent out from our congregation.

God has poured out incredibly good things upon me, my family, and our church. But all has not been easy. The two years after I wrote the outline for this book were the hardest years of my life as a pastor. When I returned from a three-month sabbatical, I found myself embroiled in several ministry crises that stretched me in ways I never thought possible. Those

days were tough, and the nights were filled with questions and doubts about my ability to carry on. I wondered whether I was capable of being a pastor.

All of this was motivation to continue working on a book about how to develop and maintain a balanced spiritual life in the midst of challenging ministry situations. Learning to lead by leaning more on Christ forced me to depend on him to show me what he had in store for me. The principles and observations in this book did not emerge from studies in a library or a classroom. They are the product of years of personal learning experiences and long periods of reflection and prayer. After more than twenty-nine years as a pastor, I have discovered things through trial and error that no amount of classical research could have shown me.

The focus of this book is sharing wisdom gleaned from years of working through what it means to serve Christ well in all aspects of life. While I've made no attempt to offer the last word on any one of the subjects or to give definitive answers to the problems discussed, I have attempted to cover a wide range of issues that are important to pastors.

My prayer is that a passion for Christ and his glory shines through in what you find here. I love the calling he has granted to me. I cannot conceive of doing anything I love more than being a pastor, equipping the saints for ministry through the ministry of the Word of God! That love then extends to others who have been called to do the same and makes me want to help them avoid the traps into which I have fallen.

How to Read This Book

Some sections of this book may strike you as more vital to your current circumstances than others. I have made no prevailing effort to build each section on information gleaned from previous ones, so you can jump around as you like. I hope and pray that you will be encouraged—encouraged not to settle, not to back off, not to stay down when you have lost your balance and hit the dirt. I pray that you will be motivated—motivated

to think, to ponder, to evaluate, and to analyze how the eternal truths of God’s Word have shaped and are shaping your concept of what it means to serve Christ with all you have and all you are! I pray that God will equip you to better shepherd his flock as you consider what has taken me so long to learn—and even longer to write down for my benefit and yours.

Paul said it best when he wrote, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service” (1 Tim. 1:12). When Christ appointed you, surely he did everything necessary to keep you faithful so that you can be in his service in all things—and not lose your balance in the process!

INTRODUCTION

SERVING WITHOUT A SAFETY NET

As he sat in his study staring at his books, the young pastor knew he'd better get busy with his sermon preparation, but his mind was still spinning from the phone call he had just finished. What happened to the dream he had of following God's calling to be a simple shepherd of a local congregation? All he ever wanted was to find God's will and do it. Pastoring this church had seemed like the perfect fit for his passions and ministry gifts eight years ago. Now everything he did seemed to make somebody unhappy, frustrated, or angry.

He could understand if he had become lazy, compromised doctrinally, failed morally, or acted arrogantly in his leadership. But even his most vocal critics would be the first to say that none of those problems were true. Why then was this so hard? He'd heard all the warnings in seminary and taken careful notes at conferences about the dangers pastors inevitably face when they assume the role of lead shepherd in a church. Yet nothing could have prepared him for the desperation he faced at this point in his ministry.

This latest phone call had been just one more in a series of confrontations with yet another member who did not appreciate the contributions he was making in the life of the church. A couple of his elders seemed intent on throwing barriers in

front of every initiative he suggested. Some of his deacons were making the rounds drumming up support for their accusation that his preaching was not as biblical as it should be. Some of his friends in ministry who had been confidantes and encouragers over the years had become so busy that sometimes they did not return his phone calls or emails for weeks at a time, if they ever got around to it at all.

He knew he was partially to blame. Even though he'd taken seminars on setting goals and gone to a conference on time management, the best he'd been able to do was keep the notes on the top of his desk with the hope that someday soon he would actually implement some of those great ideas. For all his talks, plans, and schemes, from where he sat now, he had lost more ground over the past couple of years than he had gained.

On top of that, he'd taken quite a scolding from his wife at breakfast for choosing the missions committee meeting over his daughter's piano recital the night before. He'd already missed dinner three times that week because of late afternoon meetings that he couldn't bring to a close. His son's cool attitude since he'd forgotten about their annual camping trip was just one more nail in his coffin. Every time he was about to get one area of his life under control, it seemed like three more fell apart.

"When is it going to let up? When is my ministry going to become more manageable?" All morning, these and many other thoughts left him wondering if it was worth it. "Why should I bother if no one cares about the price I am paying to serve the Lord? The Lord himself doesn't seem to notice the high cost of doing this kind of ministry. I feel like a circus performer on a high wire trying to keep my balance. People keep tossing me anvils and scolding me when I lose my balance! Is it even possible to keep my balance when my life is committed to ministry?"

So there he sat staring at the books, wondering if he'd made a mistake when he chose to pursue this calling to be a pastor. "What if everyone who is challenging everything I do is right? What if I don't have what it takes to keep my life and ministry in balance? What if this is the way it's always going to be for the next forty years! How can I find a way to be faithful to all that

God has called me to do and be? I need to figure out how to get some balance in my life and ministry! Is that even possible?"



This young pastor is not alone. Most of us have struggled to the point of desperation trying to figure out how things could have gotten so out of control, how our plans and dreams could have been tipped so easily. The more we zero in on some aspects of our calling, the more we seem to fall behind in others. When we finally feel good about the level of our obedience in some particulars, we seem to have done so at the expense of others.

Living Out God's Will with Integrity

God's will for our lives does not demand that we abandon our faithfulness to him in some areas in order to be extraordinarily faithful in others. He calls us to wholeness, to lives of integrity, where our faith in him extends to all areas of our lives. The problem we face is that we are better at living with integrity when we can break life and ministry down into neat little compartments. That way we can choose which categories will be our specialties and which will have to suffer from neglect. After all, we rationalize, no one can be expected to be great at everything. We will do the best we can and hope everyone will understand when our unbalanced lives adversely affect them. And then we hope that we can live with ourselves for giving up on ever regaining our equilibrium.

Part of the problem we have as pastors and ministry leaders is that we have few role models of what a balanced life and ministry looks like. In fact, to hear some of the most successful leaders in ministry tell it, balance is the enemy of passionate and effective service for Christ. They oppose the whole concept of balance as if it were nothing more than a compromise with mediocrity and ask, "How can we expect to make a significant difference and have a powerful impact in our church or ministry if we do not make major sacrifices along the way?" It's not a

bad question, assuming that the sacrifices do not include those things which do not belong to us, but that belong to the Lord: placing our families at risk for the sake of advancing our careers, neglecting our personal relationship with Christ in order to focus on personal ambitions, compromising our integrity and taking ethical shortcuts to accomplish our agendas, or using people to get our way instead of loving them.

We cannot separate God's calling to our ministry from his calling to our character. In other words, the end we have in mind—effective ministry—cannot be achieved by ungodly and disobedient means. It cannot be achieved by misplaced priorities and misguided values. We cannot bring glory to the same God who established both the means and the ends if we pursue either one by neglecting his expectations and ignoring his provisions. Many of our heroes in ministry look great on the platform, sound great in the seminars, and achieve great things in their respective fields of service. But if the truth were known and they could be honest with you, a lot of them have made choices they regret to get where they are. They have sacrificed to do what they do so well, but not always with the godly wisdom needed to make sure they were not giving up the wrong things. Instead of acknowledging the areas of their failures and imbalances, they gloss over them and hide them behind their public successes and accomplishments. When that kind of unbalanced model is elevated to a position of prominence and lauded as the way to go, it is no wonder that both the poor young pastor and the members of his congregation are led to believe that a balanced Christian life is not expected of those who will have the greatest impact for the kingdom.

Being out of balance does not necessarily mean that you are perpetuating a life of sin, but it does mean that you are missing the opportunity to see the sufficiency of Christ at work in making you complete in him. The concept of living fulfilled, satisfying, balanced lives is quite foreign to many contemporary models of ministry, but in reality, it offers the closest version of a biblical perspective on what it means to serve Christ. Far too many of us have simply given up on the notion that we will ever

get it right and are even now settling for lives and ministries woefully short of what Christ intends.

On the other hand, sometimes the absence of balance does involve sin that needs to be confessed and we need to repent for what we have done. When we ignore one aspect of God's will in order to focus more effort on another, we sabotage the intricacy of his plans for us. Instead of finding his sufficiency in all things when we do what he says, we get caught trying to make up for our failures in some areas by being very successful in others. We see people do that all the time: the executive who is a hero at the office but only a passive and disinterested bystander at home; the pastor who is patient and kind with people at church but is grumpy and abrupt with his or her family; the effective public speaker who is energized by the crowds but drained by the effort it takes to speak to individuals; and the chairperson who is a stickler for starting and ending meetings on time but never makes it home in time for dinner.

The Solutions We Seek

How then do you recognize potential challenges to your spiritual balance? What can you do to identify the factors that could bring about devastating losses of balance in your role as a pastor or Christian leader?

I hope that the issue of finding and maintaining biblical balance in your life is a passionate pursuit for you and not a passing whim. Having invested nearly thirty years as a pastor, I have watched the damage done in my own life and in the lives of my colleagues who have been careless and allowed imbalance to become the norm.

Although you may be able to survive for the short term in an unbalanced condition, in the long haul, the impact will be disastrous. You will not be able to sustain a vibrant life in Christ if you have settled for a life that refuses to seek the kind of biblical balance I am convinced God has prepared for those who follow him.

Several questions surface whenever I talk with others in vocational ministry. Answering these questions and addressing the attending issues and threats to biblical balance will help you find your way back into balance for the sake of Christ, for the church you serve, for your family and friends, and for your own spiritual health. Therefore, this book is broken down into seven sections, each of which relates to one of those questions, and each offering insights I have found profitable in my own life and ministry.

1. How do I make sure my calling is really from the Lord?

In the section “Juggling the Demands of Your Calling,” I hope to help you address the insecurities and vulnerability issues that inevitably threaten to throw us out of balance when people and circumstances challenge what we believe to be our calling. The solution I hope to offer is that you may become *confident* of your calling.

2. With so many visions for ministry out there, which one does God intend for me?

Without a godly vision, pastors can become confused and anxious about where they should be leading the church, scattered in their thinking, and never sure about what to do next or what is really important. A clear vision answers many questions you need resolved if you are to remain balanced in your leadership, so you can take the people where the Lord wants them to go. The purpose of the section “Sharpening the Focus of Your Vision” is to help you become more *focused* by becoming more certain that your vision is from the Lord.

3. How can I be expected to do all that ministry demands of me?

Fighting loneliness and being overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the work to be done has driven many pastors

out of the ministry. Either they have given up and pursued a less stressful career, or the stresses have made them more susceptible to career-ending moral or ethical failures. God provides a healthy balance to offset the problems of heavy labor and loneliness. He has designed his work to be done in teams of believers who labor together *reinforced* in a community of faithful servants of Christ. The “Gaining Balance by Building Teams” section will help you discover the biblical model for team ministry.

4. As a servant of Christ, how can I avoid a selfish attitude and proud spirit?

In the section “Cultivating Genuine Humility,” I hope you will become as alarmed as I am by the subtle ways that pride can overtake those of us in ministry and throw us completely out of balance in the way we are supposed to view ourselves as servants of Christ. The antidote to such imbalance is first to humble ourselves before God and then maintain that attitude with others. One of the best ways to maintain a balanced perspective about our lives and ministries is to allow the Lord and the circumstances of our lives to keep us *humble*.

5. How am I supposed to deal with the troubles that always seem to come with ministry?

You will not be in ministry very long before you face the hardships and pain of significant troubles. The general observation for people in ministry is that you are either in troubled times, coming out of them, or getting ready to go into more of them. If ever a life can be thrown out of balance, it is one that refuses God’s hand in the hard times. He will prune you occasionally, but if you can see that pruning as part of God’s design for your growth, you can begin to gain his perspective. As you read “Learning to Grow Through Your Troubles,” my hope is you will recognize his gracious touch even in the refiner’s fire as you are *purified* as a vessel fit for his service.

6. Why is it so hard to get people to be willing to change?

When you figure out what God wants you to do, how he wants it done, and where he expects you to lead his flock, the natural assumption is that the hard part is over and the fruit of your labors is before you. All that remains is for you to share your vision, enlist the support needed, and move ahead to fulfill the calling of the Lord. But people resist change. Without a steady balance to your gait, you will find the footing unstable as you try to negotiate the pathways of change. Mishandling the change process can result in stormy times in your own life, and depending on how you handle it, with the congregation. It can also bring about some profound divisions within the body of Christ. The solutions I want you to consider in the section, “Facing the Inevitability of Change,” will contribute to your effectiveness in leading change so that it can become a fruitful time. Instead of being stymied by all the resistance to change, you can lead through the change process in a way that leaves you *satisfied* with the results.

7. How am I supposed to provide spiritual leadership for others when I am so dry myself?

At one time or another, all of us find ourselves drifting out into the “dry and weary land where there is no water.”¹ Even though you stand before your people weekly and pour out for them what they need to help them quench their spiritual thirst, the truth is that your own soul “cleaves to the dust”² and you are not sure what to do. Frankly, such periods of dryness in the souls of pastors are not rare. Yet we not only suffer from the dry conditions, we compound the situation by feeling guilty because we think spiritual leaders are supposed to be immune to that kind of thing. If we are not prepared to restore our balance during such times, we can slip into a sense of desperation and hopelessness. We are tempted to give up the idea that

1. Psalm 63:1.

2. Psalm 119:25.

we can ever recapture the sweet fellowship we once had with Christ. I hope that as you read the “Combating Spiritual Dryness” section, you will learn how to regain your balance sooner. If we understand how dry spells can happen, perhaps we can recognize the symptoms before they get too far along and put in place a plan so we can be *revitalized* and enjoy the fullness of Christ’s love for us.



If you feel like the young pastor at the beginning of this introduction, the good news of God’s promises to us in Christ is that we do not have to give up when the difficulties of ministry knock us out of balance. We have to realize that overemphasizing some aspects of our life in ministry and neglecting others does not honor the commitment of our lives to Christ. We can drift out of balance more quickly than we can imagine if we do not practice the whole counsel of God in the way we walk with Christ. Take the word of someone who has been knocked from the saddle more than once: you can get back on the horse again! You can regain your stability in the saddle and get your equilibrium back if you allow the Lord to show you his ways.

What I share in the pages that follow, I would love to share with you in person, perhaps over a cup of coffee. It would be great to compare notes on how the Lord has taught us his faithfulness even in the middle of our most unbalanced days! Since we cannot sit down together, take this book and read it as one co-laborer passing on some things to another, things I have only just begun to learn. May the Lord give you greater and deeper insights while you are reading what I offer for your consideration. I hope that what I have to tell you is helpful; I know that what he will show you as you seek his wisdom will build Christ-centered, biblical balance in your life.

A life out of balance needs help! As you read my attempt to answer the seven questions I have confronted in my ministry, look for ways you can become confident, focused, reinforced, humble, purified, satisfied, and revitalized. God uses folks just like you and me, and he wants to keep us steady as we go; balanced and able to handle whatever comes our way.

PART 1

JUGGLING THE DEMANDS
OF YOUR CALLING

1

ARE YOU DRIVEN OR CALLED?

When God called you, what do you think he had in mind? If you have sampled some of the material written on what it means to be called into the ministry, you have probably been disappointed. Most people in ministry want more than broad, generic answers to questions about their calling. Although some may have doubts about what it actually means to be called to ministry, far more are dealing with very specific questions related to the circumstances of their particular place of ministry. Generalizations about the overall nature of God's calling do have value, but many of us want to address the particular issues with which we wrestle every day.

- Is the calling to be a pastor irrevocable, or can God have one sort of ministry for you now and another later in your life?
- If you become a pastor, does that mean . . . you never get a day off?

. . . you have to be an expository preacher? a topical preacher? an evangelistic preacher?

. . . you have to visit all your church members in their homes at least once a year?

. . . you should be prepared to drop everything the instant you hear of someone in the hospital and rush immediately to his or her side?

. . . you have to be on call to give counsel to anyone and everyone who knows your phone number?

. . . your family has to take a backseat to your ministry?

. . . you have to maintain the same standard of living as your congregation on a third to a half as much money?

. . . your wife has to be all things to all people (pianist, nursery worker, missions champion, Bible study teacher, modest but not dowdy, a model of motherly effectiveness with the children, and always at your side supporting you)?

. . . you have to be ready to move to a new location every few years?

- Can God really use someone to pastor a church who is not an evangelist and not even a particularly effective witness?
- What if you can preach but are not very good with administrative details? What if you are a great people-person but are lousy with planning and strategy development? What if you seem to be very effective in helping hurting, confused people one-on-one but are just average before a group?

Answers to these and hundreds of questions like them represent an extremely wide range of thoughts and concepts of what a pastor's calling ought to be. Many pastors find themselves flooded with confusion and doubt as they try to either measure up to or avoid the examples of pastors they have known in the past. The good news is that God never intended for pastors to try to satisfy the demands of every model for ministry ever developed. He did not call you to crush you!

God calls you to engage in a lifetime of effective, satisfying ministry in which he maximizes your spiritual gifts, considers *your* calling (not someone else's), recognizes your strengths and weaknesses, and commits to shaping you into a godly individual who grows more mature every day in your walk with Jesus Christ.

Your Calling Is from God

As difficult as it is for some to understand, our calling is from God. He can and will use the collective wisdom of others to help mold our comprehension of what that calling should look like, but essentially, he wants our personal calling to be measured by one standard: the Word of God. His will for your life may share similarities with his will for others, but in his perfect wisdom, he has tailored a purpose and a plan uniquely suited to each of us. Our individual calling to ministry will certainly reflect that distinctive design. In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul expresses it this way:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.

1 Corinthians 1:26–29

Although some pastors stand out in our minds as “superstars” who give every appearance of having been blessed with more than their share of gifts, Paul assures us that there are “not many” like that. Our calling is not measured by the plethora of gifts we have received but according to the purposes God has for the unique gifts he has entrusted to each of us. In fact, Paul also says that we have been “called according to His purpose” (Rom.

8:28). Our responsibility in meeting the demands of ministry consists of being and doing all that fulfills God's purpose in our lives. To that end, we are called "to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" by honoring the special purposes God has established for us (Eph. 4:1).

Therefore, our calling will often be misunderstood, challenged, and even attacked by those who see pastoral calling as a one-size-fits-all issue. The churches we serve will have stated and unstated expectations about the particular calling they envision for their pastor. Individuals within those churches will further complicate matters by adding their own expectations to the mix and keep us, as pastors, off balance by their constant questions about why we do not do what "pastors should do." If that is not exasperating enough, deep down inside we wonder if perhaps they are right and we are not cutting it as a pastor. Talk about adding guilt on top of confusion! No wonder pastors have a hard time keeping their equilibrium!

You may ask, "Since my calling is from God, should I be unconcerned about the expectations people have?" No, that is unrealistic. You cannot simply ignore them, but you do not have to satisfy them.

I struggled with this for years. I was blessed to have been exposed to the successful ministries of several effective pastors, but to my dismay, I was not like any of them. I spent years trying to become like them, essentially living like David in Saul's armor, knowing that the fit was awful but sensing that it was not "okay" to come to the battle with my own sling and stones. Eventually I discovered what every pastor must learn: my calling is from God, and my equipping is from him as well.

How has he equipped you? Discovering this will answer many questions about your calling, because the clue to what he wants you to do is found in what he has equipped you to do.

Your Calling Is to a Balanced Ministry

Without debate, it is certain that if you have been busy trying to succeed in a style of ministry to which God never called

you, you have been way out of balance in your life and have suffered untold misery. Juggling the demands of your calling as well as the demands of someone else's calling has caused the downfall of many pastors. The weight of responsibility simply overcame them and threw them over the edge.

Once you have learned to be content with the calling God has given you, you will find that you have quite enough to keep you occupied within the context of your own concerns. Within the ministry calling God has designed for you, there is still plenty of room for the perils of overload and imbalance. How you handle them will determine how well you stay in balance. In your ministry, you will find there are various factors that seem to compete against one another and make you feel pulled in all directions. The challenge is to recognize the difference between competing demands and balancing counterweights.

Should you spend more time in prayer or more time handling the dispute between two of your deacons? Should you be out visiting more or staying in the office to be available in case someone with a pressing need phones or stops by? Should you be spending more time cultivating a relationship with your unbelieving neighbor or knocking on the doors of people you would never meet otherwise? Which is it going to be this week—more time for counseling or more time for sermon preparation?

Life in ministry, even within the specific area of your calling, presents so many issues that compete for time that you can easily go to bed each night feeling like a complete failure because you never got it worked out in the right proportions. There is always something you think needs to be done but has to be slighted in order to do something else. Demands upon your time and energy will force you to make choices you would rather not make. How you make those choices and then how you feel about your decision afterward will largely be determined by the way you see yourself—as someone God has *called* or as someone who has become inexplicably *driven*.

Gordon MacDonald, in his book *Ordering Your Private World*, explains what it is like to be a person who is driven.

In an exploration of the inner sphere of the person, one has to begin somewhere, and I have chosen to begin where Christ appears to have begun—with the distinction between the *called* and the *driven*. Somehow He separated people out on the basis of their tendency to be driven or their willingness to be called. He dealt with their motives, the basis of their spiritual energy, and the sorts of gratification in which they were interested.¹

MacDonald outlines the symptoms of a driven person, which I summarize here. As you read, ask yourself if some of your struggles in handling the demands of your calling might not be related to your tendency to be motivated by a driving force within you rather than a zealous calling to follow Christ.

Symptoms of Driven People

1. A driven person is most often gratified only by accomplishment.
2. A driven person is preoccupied with the symbols of accomplishment.
3. A driven person is usually caught in the uncontrolled pursuit of expansion.
4. Driven people tend to have a limited regard for integrity.
5. Driven people often possess limited or undeveloped people skills.
6. Driven people tend to be highly competitive.
7. A driven person often possesses a volcanic force of anger, which can erupt any time he or she senses opposition or disloyalty.
8. Driven people are usually abnormally busy.²

MacDonald continues, “This then is the driven person—not an entirely attractive picture. What often disturbs me as I look at this picture is the fact that much of our world is run by driven people. We have created a system that rides on their backs. And where that is true in businesses, in churches, and in homes,

1. Gordon MacDonald. *Ordering Your Private World* (New York: Oliver Nelson, 1985), 29.

2. *Ibid.*, 31–36.

the growth of people is often sacrificed for accomplishment and accumulation.”³

When driven people confront the competing demands on their time, they view them as counterproductive assaults against their agenda, their mandate to get things done. Competing demands confuse and delay their carefully conceived plans and leave them feeling frustrated by their inability to solve the riddle, to find a way to get rid of the distractions that impede the progress of their singular focus.

Obviously, I believe that pastors are supposed to be called, not driven! Certainly our calling will result in an undeniable drive to fulfill all that God intends for us, but we will not be controlled or consumed by ungodly motives measured in terms of achievement and accomplishment. Our greatest satisfaction arises from being faithful to Christ, first in the character of our hearts, and then in the conduct of our lives and ministries.

3. Ibid., 36.