

PASTORAL MARGINS

finding balance in ministry and in life

by Hershael York



*“They made me keeper of the vineyards,
but my own vineyard I have not kept”
(Song 1:6)*

THE PBS documentary “Carrier” is a fascinating look at life on board the USS Nimitz, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier that bestowed its name on an entire class of ships. More than 5,000 sailors and marines live in this floating armed city that the president can dispatch to extend the military might of the United States wherever in the world it may be needed. An aircraft carrier is a mobile four-acre expression

of United States sovereignty in the global matrix of power and diplomacy.

Though the crew who serve on the Nimitz may perform radically different jobs, they all work toward one purpose: to maintain and launch aircraft that can deliver ordinance and demolish chosen targets. Food service personnel, pilots and machinists are all there to make sure that the Nimitz does its job in any circumstance and at any place in the world.

Every day crews from various departments abandon their usual assignments and leave their typical tasks to participate in a curious ritual called a “FOD

walk.” FOD, an acronym for “foreign object damage,” is anathema to the 85 aircraft that call Nimitz home. On a FOD walk, the crews walk every inch of the deck in three or four lines that stretch from one side of the ship to the other. With their heads down and their eyes focused on the deck beneath them, they painstakingly search for an errant screw or a shred of metal because they know that a tiny sliver of metal can damage and ruin a multi-million dollar aircraft and even cost lives. They have been made painfully aware that carelessness can do what the most sophisticated

enemy weapons can seldom accomplish: take the Nimitz and its flight deck out of commission.

While we've all heard the horror stories of pastors who fall into sexual sin or embezzle funds, far more pastors lose their ministries — or, at the very least their joy — because they don't vigilantly keep watch on the little things in their lives and ministries. In the same way that a screw or a piece of metal that is useful in its proper place can cause a crash if separated from its purpose, pastors who don't faithfully guard against it can find that even a good thing out of place can wreak havoc.

Nowhere is the need to maintain a healthy equilibrium more important than in the balance between the public and the personal. Pastors often feel torn between church and home, between ministry to others and ministry to family. Though I would never deny the challenge that maintaining that balance presents, family and ministry are not in competition or contradictory to God's perfect plan and will for our lives. Accordingly, if I feel like they are, then I'm doing something wrong. God doesn't issue competing calls. If His Word is true, then He has given us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3). We have all the time, resources and opportunity we need to do God's will. That means that we can never claim a lack of any of those things as the reason we don't succeed at home.

While a pastor's job is unique for many reasons, his family's key role in his success or failure is certainly one of Christian ministry's greatest challenges. Before we complain about the inher-

ent unfairness of this phenomenon, we would do well to remind ourselves that God actually gives the church the right to examine the pastor's family as part of his qualification for ministry. If an elder doesn't rule his house well, he can hardly be competent to lead the church of God. With so much at stake, ministers of the Gospel must devise ways to strategically pour their lives and time into their ministries at home as well as in the church. Though the complexity of life guarantees that ministers will always feel some tension between these two arenas, a few key principles can drastically reduce such tension and ensure that life doesn't rip apart at the seams.

Make the Word of God Central

Through Moses, God told the Israelites the ideal way to teach the Scriptures to the next generation:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut 6:6-9).

The primary task of a parent, therefore, is to train the heart of his child to love the Lord. The child's life must be saturated with God's Word. Instructing the child in the Word of God goes far beyond regular devotions. It means that every facet of life must relate to the Word. The child needs to see an

evident love for the Lord and His Word that permeates every part of family life. Too many pastors spend time preparing sermons and lessons for church members while neglecting to impart a heart for God to their own children.

The greatest theological education I received was not in seminary, but at my dad's side. I was privileged to grow up in a pastor's home, and as a small child my father began to systematically and faithfully teach me the whole Bible. Before bed, riding in a car, sitting on the porch or visiting with him in his study I would hear the most fascinating and dramatic stories imaginable. I can still recall the way he told me of Elisha striking the Jordan with Elijah's mantle, crying, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" to see the waters part before him. I can still hear him telling me how Nathan confronted David, drawing him in with a story and pointing his accusing finger in the king's face, telling him, "Thou art the man!" My dad could make the characters of the Bible walk right out of the pages of Scripture and into my bedroom. He imparted an excitement and a love for the Word to me.

One of the greatest compliments I ever receive from members of my church is "You make the Bible come alive." What they can't possibly know is that when they think they are listening to me, they really hear my dad speaking God's Word to my 6-year-old heart. Now more than 40 years later, that love for the Word overflows into my classroom and my congregation, but I owe it to a father who was never too busy teaching others to take time to teach me.



In the same way, a pastor ought to relate the Word of God to the everyday occurrences of life. Children should be taught to value all people because they are created in God's image. They should understand that the news on television is usually bad because men are sinners in rebellion against God. They should be given a basic theological and biblical framework through which to interpret life.

In the same way, my primary task as a pastor is to teach my people how to feed on the Word of God so that they can glorify Him through worship and witness, obedience and devotion. If I make the Word central in both my home and my church, then those purposes will never be at odds. I might face strategic challenges regarding my time and influence, but never about what I am trying to accomplish. My intentions in my home and in my church will coincide and overlap in wonderful ways.

Be Fun to Live With

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). If your Christianity makes you dreary and dull, you don't understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit nor what Christ has done on your behalf. If pastors would reflect the joy of the Lord in their ministry, marriage and home, people around them would be delightfully drawn to the Lord.

While pastors often have to bear heavy burdens, they do their families a terrible injustice when they don't learn to lay those aside when they walk in the door of their homes. I once asked my wife, Tanya, to tell me her favorite part of the day. She quickly said, "When you come

home. You come in the door acting silly, imitating Ricky Ricardo, whispering something in my ear, or wrestling with the boys. It doesn't matter what might have been happening; you elevate us. If we were in a bad mood, suddenly our mood changes dramatically. You have the power to lift our spirits in a moment."

Feeling a little proud of myself, I asked her further what was her least favorite time of the day. "When you come home," she said, shocking me a bit. "If you come in dragging and griping, in a bad mood and aggravated with someone or something, it doesn't matter how great our moods have been, you drag us down. You have the power to make that moment either the best or the worst part of our day."

Don't Just Spend Your Time, Invest It

A minister has to learn to invest his time wisely rather than merely letting it pass. He must choose to be present for the events that matter. Some pastors pride themselves on "always being there" for their church members. Adrian Rogers used to say, "The pastor who is always available is seldom worth anything when he is." Whether dealing with his church or his family, no minister can be there for everything. The key is to be present for the things that have the greatest impact. A pastor can overindulge his church as surely as he can overindulge his children. The key is to set an example of faithfulness, discipline and integrity.

Because of my schedule, I did not attend all of the ball games, school events or performances of my children.

We would have an honest talk about an event's level of importance. If one of my sons said to me, "This is important to me. I want you there," then I would do everything possible to make it happen. By the same token, I sometimes had to explain that because of a previous commitment I had made, I had to be away. I could not break my word.

If children see that ethos consistently permeate their dad's life, they will understand and support it. In 1995 when my oldest son was 12 years old, the Atlanta Braves won the World Series. Michael was a huge Braves fan, and I foolishly promised him that if they ever made it back to the Series, no matter how old we were or what we were doing, we would drop everything and go. To my abject horror, I watched the 1996 playoffs knowing that the World Series was scheduled the same week our church had scheduled an evangelist for a revival meeting. When they won the right to face the Yankees in the series, I knew I was going to have to keep my promise. Though I would usually never miss a revival meeting for a ball game, a promise was, after all, a promise. To this day I am not sure that the evangelist ever got over it or that my church understood (even though I did my best to explain), but I know my son learned that his dad was willing to keep a promise even when it cost him.

That kind of commitment made it easier for my family to understand when, at other times, I had to miss some events. I often brought them into the decision process, asking them questions like, "Which will have the greatest impact? What are

the negative and positive consequences of each choice?" I believe that parents who pride themselves on being there for everything are little different than parents who buy their children everything they want. I want my children to know how high a priority they are to me, but I do not want them to ever think that they are the center of the universe around which everything else revolves. Some crises and needs are more significant than their soccer games. But in the same way, I want my church to know that some needs in my family are more important than the WMU dinner.

In all candor, not everyone is going to understand the choices a minister makes. As much as I hate to admit it, pastors need to learn to live with people's disappointment. Someone will always have their own opinion about the way the pastor should spend his time, and they will inevitably complain about it when their expectations aren't met. Sometimes a pastor just has to decide which criticism he is most willing to face: "He's not always available," or "His kids sure are bad."

Include Your Family in Ministry Tasks

A friend of mine used to tell me, "Wherever you go, take someone with you." Following his advice, I always tried to take one of my sons on visits to homes, hospitals or preaching engagements. I used those opportunities to teach them how to care for people, how to live a godly life or just to listen to what was on their hearts.

In the same way, I include my wife in my sermon preparation, frequently ask-

ing her for advice in crafting the sermon, searching for illustrations or the best way to relate truth to a contemporary audience. A blessed fringe benefit is that Tanya has become a wonderful speaker herself, able to exegete a passage and present it in an engaging manner. Now that our sons are grown, she accompanies me almost everywhere I go. By including her in my ministry, we have grown closer and my church sees us as a team. I am also less likely to face moral temptation or simply to grow distant from her. By including my family I cultivate trust, camaraderie and competency.

I have always realized that I only have closing windows of opportunity with my family and that I must seize the moment to share in their lives. My sons have grown and begun families of their own. Because I made investments in their lives, now I get to enjoy those Sunday night phone calls from Michael about what he preached, or Thursday night phone calls from Seth about how much his prayer group means to him. Because the Lord led me to invest in them, now I get to enjoy some of the fruit.

No pastor can find the perfect formula for success, the failsafe recipe for balancing church and home, ministry and family. But if he is willing to take as much care for his calling as sailors take for the deck of an aircraft carrier, he can identify and remove the little things that would disable him. If God has called him to shepherd both a family and a church, then God is most glorified when he sees that these ministries complement each other rather than compete.



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