

Book Review of
Dear Timothy: Letters On Pastoral Ministry
Edited by Thomas K. Ascol

Reviewed by Kevin Roberts

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As a new pastor, or one who is struggling in the ministry and has lost sight of some of the fundamentals of effectual ministry, consider for a moment what the value would be of having at your convenience the counsel of a group of pastors who, combined, have well over four century's worth of experience and wisdom – men of the faith who have been through the pain of reforming wayward churches, healing wounded consciences, preaching to the faithless, and who carry on their bodies battle wounds from a life of spending and being spent for the sake of Christ. Would that be of interest to you? Would this be worth the cost of one meal at a nice restaurant? At the risk of breaking contextual rules, I echo the words of Isaiah, “*Why (would) you spend money for what isn't bread?*”¹

Dear Timothy is a collection of wisdom and counsel from pastors who are actively involved in this office today. They are not men of by-gone days who faced much tamer issues – they are confronted with exactly what you will be facing in the days to come. They are veterans who have become wise as serpents and gentle as doves. They are fighters who charged into battle, as you will, with the Word of God and a lot of great ideas and have realized, through sometimes painful experience that only one of these will do.

The theme of the book is, fittingly, the same as Paul instructed to Timothy – preach the Word, guard the faith, keep watch over your life and doctrine, and shepherd the flock to

¹ Isaiah 55: 2 (NASB)

which you have been entrusted. Though, what should be capitalized on is the wealth of help that is set forth for being a consistent shepherd in the work of the ministry.

There are literally hundreds of books that will claim to teach you new and exciting ways to “do church.” What sets them apart from this work, and other works like this one, is that many of the methods advocated will revolve around external means and methods, such as music styles, drama teams, meeting felt needs, etc. All of these are issues that will have to be addressed at some point in your ministry. If done rightly, they can be used to not only grow, but also strengthen the church. However, first things must be dealt with first, and this is where this book will become treasure to a minister.

Tom Ascol warns of the disease of professionalism that is epidemic in our day and states “*the heart is the primary tool of every pastor.*”² Neglect of the heart may build large buildings and congregations around winsome personalities but will ultimately be found to have a foundation of sand with roots that barely penetrate deeper than topsoil.

Wise counsel is given to examine what God has called you to be in prioritized form so as to maintain the balance needed for a vibrant church and a supportive home.

Conrad Mbewe provides needed admonishment towards a “full-orbed self watch.” It seems almost absurd for him to suggest that a minister must be sure of his conversion, but when considering the fallen nature of our hearts and our quickness to receive praise from others, it is an easy thing to be convinced of something we are not. Pulpits are full of those who have been ill advised by well-meaning, yet spiritually non-discerning church members.

² *Dear Timothy*, pg 25

Mbewe draws from many holy men (Spurgeon, Owen, and Baxter) to drive home the critical need of self-watch. He is not bashful in confronting the reality of sin and its magnetism in the life of the minister.

Ted Tripp masterfully gives practical application to Paul's words to Timothy in 1 Tim 3:4.³ Love your family. Again, instruction like this should go without saying to a minister of the Word, but it is so often the most basic issues that become the highest hindrances to an effective ministry. In loving your family, they will not only be your strongest supporters, but they will also be a refuge and a sanctuary that will be much needed in the coming years and difficulties.

Ted Christman (Pastor Ted – even “PT” – as he is affectionately known by his congregational family) provides what I would consider to be one of the two most important chapters regarding the work of the ministry – “Love Your Flock”. If this is not part of the dynamic of your ministry, find a different occupation; you have not been called to be a shepherd. Love endures all things, and in the ministry, one will be called to endure far more than in any other endeavor the world has ever known. Pastor Ted points out that a shepherd has the example set down before him in Jesus Christ. It is one of laying your life down for ***His*** sheep.

The other chapter referred to above is written by Roger Ellsworth and addresses the minister's primary directive, “Preach the Word.” It is here that the temptation of letting the culture shape the preaching is addressed with powerful precision. Ellsworth states

³ “*He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity.*” (NASB)

that the Word of God is not to serve as a springboard to preaching, but is to be the sum total of it. Ellsworth provides ten principles that offer help in remaining steadfast in this course. One principle is that as preaching the Word is the most important task, it should be given pre-eminence. Ellsworth mentions that all other tasks should be subservient to the preparation of the message and that the minister should never neglect ample time being taken for this specific purpose. While certainly not a point of contention, there is a need in this section to include ways that a less entrenched minister can effectively, but affectionately, instruct his flock in this need.

Just as the Word of God must absorb the pastor's message, so his life and ministry must be empowered by prayer. This is the subject of Martin Holdt's contribution to this book. He shows the record of prayer being foundational in redemptive history and confronts the lack of it in churches today.

While prayer is far from absent in churches today, it has become so self-centered and theologically dumbed-down that it resembles more of what one would find in superstitious idolatry. Church members need to be taught how to pray because life *in* the church must consist in praying *for* the church. This isn't the only aspect to prayer that Holdt addresses. He also treats the need of the pastor's prayer life. Because there is so much work to be done and the One to whom the pastor is accountable will judge the pastor's work accordingly, there is simply no way that the office of shepherd should be undertaken by a man who is not first and foremost a man of prayer. Listen to his own words regarding this: *"...prayer is our highest work. It is hard work. It is a fight against the adversary. It is a battle against the flesh. It is essential work. The minister*

who does not pray for his flock is no minister at all. He is proud because he does his work as if he can succeed without God's power. He shows no pity because he does not realize that his people's greatest need is the Lord's divine favors upon them. Be assured of this, if he does not pray, he will pay a high price."⁴

Sobering words, but sound advice from a fellow minister in the fight.

There is much more practical wisdom and instruction contained within this work that will prove to be a help to ministers. The sections on reading the puritans by Joel Beeke are tremendously valuable. One should spend *days* reading these two chapters.

There isn't a single chapter in this book that a pastor will not find beneficial to their work in the ministry, but what makes it even more commendable is that these great men of God are all alive and accessible, at least to some extent. They are fellow laborers and brothers in Christ who have faced and will be facing exactly what each and every minister is facing in today's culture.

⁴ *Dear Timothy*, page 104