

A BALANCED MINISTRY

by Bill Boekestein

PEOPLE LOVE EXTREMES. The *X Games* were first called *Extreme Games*. *Balanced Games* or *Moderate Games* just don't have the same ring. We are drawn to extreme positions. They are flashier than balanced ones. They offer the euphoria of a crusade because they demand energy to defend; the partisan attention they attract creates cliques that suggest belonging. We feel important when we are firmly lodged in a particular camp. Balance seems to put us into a boring no-man's land populated by the cowardly and complacent. We often become imbalanced to appease our idolatrous hearts, which crave attention, approval, and admiration. Not knowing what we don't know and being vigorously convinced by what we think we know, young-ish ministers especially can struggle with balance. Extreme positions somehow seem to compensate for a lack of wisdom.

But sustainable ministry, the kind that stewards our own resources and honors the complexity and diversity of church life, requires us to pursue careful balance. The opportunities to avoid imbalance seem nearly endless. But here is a start—a sample of six areas in which biblical balance can help cultivate a more fruitful, long-term ministry.

1. Workload (Overcommitted vs. Underproductive)

Ministry is busy. Sometimes, like farmers, pastors will have to embrace a schedule that would be unsustainably rigorous if normalized. But even busy seasons require balance. God told the Israelites, “In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest” (Ex. 34:21).

Some ministers are overcommitted. Some feel forced to overcommit. Others choose to be busy. But we all have a point at which our ministry commitments will jeopardize our joy, our physical and mental health, and our family's wellbeing (1 Cor. 7:32–35). So how can we avoid becoming overcommitted?

1. Advocate for yourself. Healthy church leadership will be vigilant in promoting appropriate commitment balance. But in other settings, pastors may have to be respectfully frank to fellow leaders: “Here is what I believe I can and must do. It leaves out these things. But this is the best I think I can do right now.” Godly council members will honor such self-advocacy.

2. Learn to delegate. If you are a disciplined worker and not just looking to coast through the ministry, entrusting and equipping others to take on responsibilities not essential to your calling can be good for you and the church. Matt Perman is right: “God designed the world so that there will always be more things for us to do than we are able to do. This isn’t just so we learn to prioritize; it’s so that we learn to depend on each other.”¹
3. Be creative. My wife jokes that she and I had to get to know each other again after seminary. We recall barely seeing each other during my years of study with two kids, a nearly full-time teaching job, and abundant student-preaching opportunities. Life was busy. But busyness encouraged creativity. My wife voice-recorded required seminary reading to listen to on my commutes—the nineteenth-century Irish pastor Thomas Murphy still has a Southern Californian female voice in my head! I also learned the skill of content recycling. Seminary papers informed my classroom lectures. Today I rarely publish anything that didn’t originate within the ministry context of the local church.
4. A vital principle of productivity is this “Know what’s most important and put it first.”² Establish and stick to priorities and learn to say “no.” Doing so can help keep us from making “a millimeter of progress in a million directions.”³ Limiting ourselves to what we truly believe we are called to can also prime us to be more content with what we do accomplish.

Some ministers are underproductive. This is uncommon among ministers I know. But upon closer inspection, we might observe in many ministries a disparity between busyness and productivity. Some ministers are active but undisciplined. They spend too much time on social media or are preoccupied with various forms of superficial work.⁴

2. Ministry Focus (Inward vs. Outward)

Whether the church should be more outward or inward facing has generated much recent attention *and* tension.

Proponents of a missional ecclesiology have sometimes given the impression that the sum and substance of Christian ministry is to reach the lost. They run the risk of communicating that members are only valuable as outreach instruments, like “children who discover they were adopted primarily to fill jobs on the farm.”⁵ That’s

1. Matt Perman, *What’s Best Next: How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get Things Done* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 229.

2. Perman, *What’s Best Next*, 133.

3. Greg McKeown, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* (New York: Crown Business, 2014), 7.

4. A helpful resource for becoming more productive—though not necessarily busier—is Cal Newport’s *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2016).

5. Michael Spotts, group email Jan. 23, 2020. Shared with permission.

imbalanced. In response, others have criticized the missional church movement and advocated an almost exclusive emphasis on caring for church members. That's also imbalanced.

But “covenant nurture versus community outreach” is a false dilemma. It is not a zero-sum game, as if for outsiders to gain, insiders must lose. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert argue that the Great Commission “describes the church’s key assignment of what to do until the Lord returns. . . . The church exists, in major part, to extend the apostolic witness everywhere.”⁶ But rather than make ministry lopsided, the Great Commission promotes balance. Jesus’ call to make disciples of all nations demands a radical departure from the inward focus of the Old Testament church. To preoccupy ourselves with internal activities is to forfeit our birthright as the mature Israel of God (Gal. 6:16). But Jesus also commissions the church to disciple those who have been brought in. The church disciples by baptizing and teaching holistic obedience to God’s will. New disciples are taught then baptized; children of believers are baptized then taught. The Great Commission doesn’t pit outreach against covenant nurture or congregational worship. It has as its goal the gathering of a complete, worshiping, God-glorifying covenant community.

Ministers most faithful to the Great Commission will lead by example in both reaching the lost and discipling God’s people.

3. Exegetical Footing (Culture vs. Scripture)

Most folks who have embraced the reformed tradition understand the danger of culturally savvy but biblically ignorant preachers. Good communicators who are hermeneutically unskilled are radically disqualified for the ministry. Being “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) has to do with content—an elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught” (Titus 1:9)—not mere charisma. But there is an opposite imbalance.

Flawless biblical exegesis will not result in good teaching if we fail to know our audience. Surely you have felt slighted when a conversation partner assumed he knew you but was way off. His ample advice didn’t fit your situation or wasn’t delivered in a way best suited to succeed. Culturally careless sermons can come off as dull, out of touch, superficial, or insensitive. One popular hermeneutics book observes that “Traditionally, biblical interpreters have been better trained and skilled in exegeting Scripture than in exegeting contemporary culture.” But “effective exegesis not only perceives what the message meant originally but also determines how best to express and apply that meaning to one’s contemporaries.” “Contextualizing biblical truth requires interpretive bifocals.”⁷ John Stott famously called preachers to live between two worlds. The preacher is a bridge-builder tasked with relating “the given message to the existential situation.”⁸

6. *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 49–50.

7. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2004), 235, 231–232.

8. John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 137.

To be a bridge-builder requires more than big-picture cultural savviness. The preacher needs

More than familiarity with the general situation of the congregation; the socio-economic, the socio-cultural, and the religious situation. He must also understand how people relate to, and live in, that situation—what it means to them . . . the pastor must not only know what a preteen is, what pubescence means, and what the world in which his students operate is like. Over and over, through his interactions with the students, he must try to understand how they are experimenting with adulthood and creating and living in their own world.⁹

Paul’s ministry is an excellent example for us. His message to the Athenian philosophers (Acts 17) and his address to the Jewish Sanhedrin (22:1–23:11) show how carefully Paul “perceived” his audience (17:22, 23:6).

Good bridge-builders will interrogate their chosen text and their grasp of how their actual audience might receive the message of the text. In sermon preparation, pastors might ask themselves how an infertile couple might engage this text. What about parents of a large family? A philosophy major? An elementary-age child? A family with a special needs child? A blue-collar worker? A white-collar worker? A Trump voter? A Biden voter? In sermon preparation, bridge-builders might imagine that they are not so much “preaching” the text but discussing the text with a mixed group.

4. Presence (Mediated vs. Unmediated)

The Apostle John teaches us a balance. He knew the value of face-to-face time (2 John 1:12; 3 John 1:13–14). But he used the medium of writing when presence wasn’t practical.

Some ministers aren’t present enough with their people. They appear, at least, to be aloof. By contrast, Paul was “with” his people in Ephesus, in public worship and private home gatherings (Acts 20:18, 20). He knew that face-to-face is almost always the best way to communicate. It allows for immediate correction of misunderstandings. When done well, it can lower our guard and invite deeper sharing and truer transparency. Pastors who take the time to be with the congregation—especially early in a ministry—will reap huge relational dividends. Ministers will have time to grow in their sermon preparation and preaching skills. But it is not always possible to recast an unfavorable relational first impression.

Some ministers are present too much. This sounds strange. But some pastors burn themselves out by spending too much time with people. They become emotionally drained. Or, they use up too much time that should be dedicated to other responsibilities. Some ministers need to send more notes of encouragement—perhaps

9. Jacob Firet, *Dynamics in Pastoring* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 276.

written in part by their wife or a secretary—or make more brief phone calls if this helps them from being overwhelmed by too many visits.

COVID-19 has taught us the importance of being with people.¹⁰ But it has hopefully also taught us creative ways to practice presence within the limitations of real ministry.

5. Criticism (Indifferent vs. Hypersensitive)

We can give too little attention to people’s criticism in the ministry. There is a false piety that dismisses what people think about us. But Scripture teaches us to value our reputation; how people think about us affects how they think about God (Acts 25:10). The ninth commandment requires “the maintaining and promoting . . . of our own . . . good name” (WSC 77). Bishops must have a good reputation with outsiders (1 Tim. 3:7); they have to care about how others view them. John commended Demetrius for his “good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself” (3 John 1:12).

We can also give too much attention to criticism. Church people, even other leaders, will say things that are untrue, unkind, unsympathetic, un-nuanced, and untimely. Allowing unhelpful criticism to bind your conscience will paralyze you. You will rarely receive unanimous support for your ministry decisions. But unanimity isn’t essential. “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5), refusing to default automatically to the opinions of others. Even the criticism or requests of individual elders do not carry the weight of the judgment of the entire Consistory. It may be necessary sometimes to tell an opinionated elder, “Brother, I value your input. But I need to get a sense of how the Consistory sees this matter.”

A balanced minister will engage criticism realistically, humbly, with sober judgment, and with grace.¹¹

6. Empathy (Disinterest vs. Overinvestment)

It would be nearly impossible to be a gospel minister without any empathy. Our Good Shepherd was filled with compassion as he looked out at the people who were like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36). He felt their pain, suffered with them, and empathized.

One hazard of being a young minister is that lack of experience can jeopardize our ability to meet others in their troubles. We don’t understand the physical aches of old age. Our hearts haven’t broken over the apostasy of children. We don’t live with the regrets of massively imperfect parenting. We can’t relate to the unique challenges—and blessings—of long-term singleness. We have to learn to listen, walk with those whose experiences outpace ours, feel, hurt, and cry. We should strive for, as one counselor put it, “Maximal empathy without loss of objectivity. . . . The growth

10. William Boekestein, “The Grace of Presence.” Core Christianity. July 15, 2020. <https://corechristianity.com/resource-library/articles/the-grace-of-presence/>

11. See Joel Beeke and Nick Thompson, *Pastors and Their Critics: A Guide to Coping with Criticism in the Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020) which includes an appendix titled, “Preparing for the Fires of Criticism while in Seminary.”

promoter who does not enter the relationship as equal, does not enter the relationship; he not only does not come close to the other; he cannot even maintain distance: he is simply not there.” To sense someone’s “inner world of private personal meanings as if it were your own, but without ever losing the ‘as if’ quality, this is empathy.”¹²

It is also possible to be too empathetic in the ministry. Ministers simply lack the capacity of the soul to shoulder the hurts of the flock. We aren’t Jesus. To forget that can ruin us. Well-meaning ministers can become far more invested in the hardships of parishioners than they should. Several times in my ministry, I have almost literally had the wind punched out of my gut upon learning of shocking sins or losses of dear friends and brothers and sisters in the church. I once became acutely depressed for several days. Extreme empathy was crushing me. I had to learn to commit my friends into God’s care, to “transfer the weight of spiritual burdens onto shoulders bigger, stronger, broader, and more durable.”¹³ I could not bear their sin or loss. I could not be responsible for their decisions. I had to love them as best I could and leave God to work out their destiny.

So how can we become more balanced in these and other ministry arenas? Here are four simple suggestions for getting started.

1. Know yourself. Determine where you are on the spectrum of critical ministerial characteristics. If you are imbalanced, which direction do you lean? How can you become better centered?
2. Explain yourself. If you are highly introverted, you might need to help your congregation better understand the practical implications of personality types, so they don’t misinterpret your actions. Ministers who live far away from extended family may need to point out to the council and congregation that they love the local church and are not lazy but simply need more vacation time to be with out-of-area family.
3. Do your best to be well-rounded. None of us will be perfectly balanced. Our imbalances can help us depend on the power of God to offset our weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:9–10). And it is suitable for us to focus on our gifts, not neglecting the unique talents we bring to Christ’s body. At the same time, Christian leaders must “still take care to do what the Bible says are their duties, even those they do not feel they are very good at.”¹⁴
4. Trust God for the results. Be your best you. But trust God to be God. Your greatest strengths and most careful balance still leave you woefully insufficient for the task. But your sufficiency is from God, “who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:5–6).

12. Firet, *Dynamics in Pastoring*, 163, 164, 273.

13. J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer*, 2nd rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 50.

14. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 293.