



What I Believe

ABOUT

Ministry

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When I started out as a pastor, I thought I had a robust set of convictions. It turns out that they weren't as robust as I thought. The result was costly: most of the mistakes I've made in ministry are a result of not holding tightly to what matters most.

[Al Mohler](#) is right:

“

The leadership that matters most is convictional – deeply convictional. This quality of leadership springs from those foundational beliefs that shape who we are and establish our beliefs about everything else. Convictions are not merely beliefs we hold; they are those beliefs that hold us in their grip. We would not know who we are but for these bedrock beliefs, and without them we would not know how to lead.

”

I've been thinking, then, about my ministry convictions. I've been spurred on by Mohler, [Todd Henry](#), and by the awareness that I'm a better leader when I carefully articulate and live by my convictions.

Here's a list of what I stand for. It's still a work in progress. I expect to add to it and improve it over the years. But I don't expect that many of the convictions I articulate here will change. I wish I'd held to them 25 years ago. My service to those I've pastored would have been richer for it.

Convictions

Here's what I believe about ministry:

1 **God uses ordinary people. That's all there are.**

[Gordon MacDonald](#) brought this home for me. "Almost everyone in the Bible had a broken-world experience. Virtually no one was exempt." God graciously uses the weak and unqualified (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

2 **Ministry begins with watching our lives and doctrine, and loving and caring for our families.**

Nobody said it better than Paul: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16). Part of our calling as elders is to love our families and to manage our households well (1 Timothy 3:2-5).

3 **What we do in private will determine how we minister in public.**

Character is forged in private. To paraphrase John Owen, be killing sin or sin will kill you and your ministry. "If anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21).

4

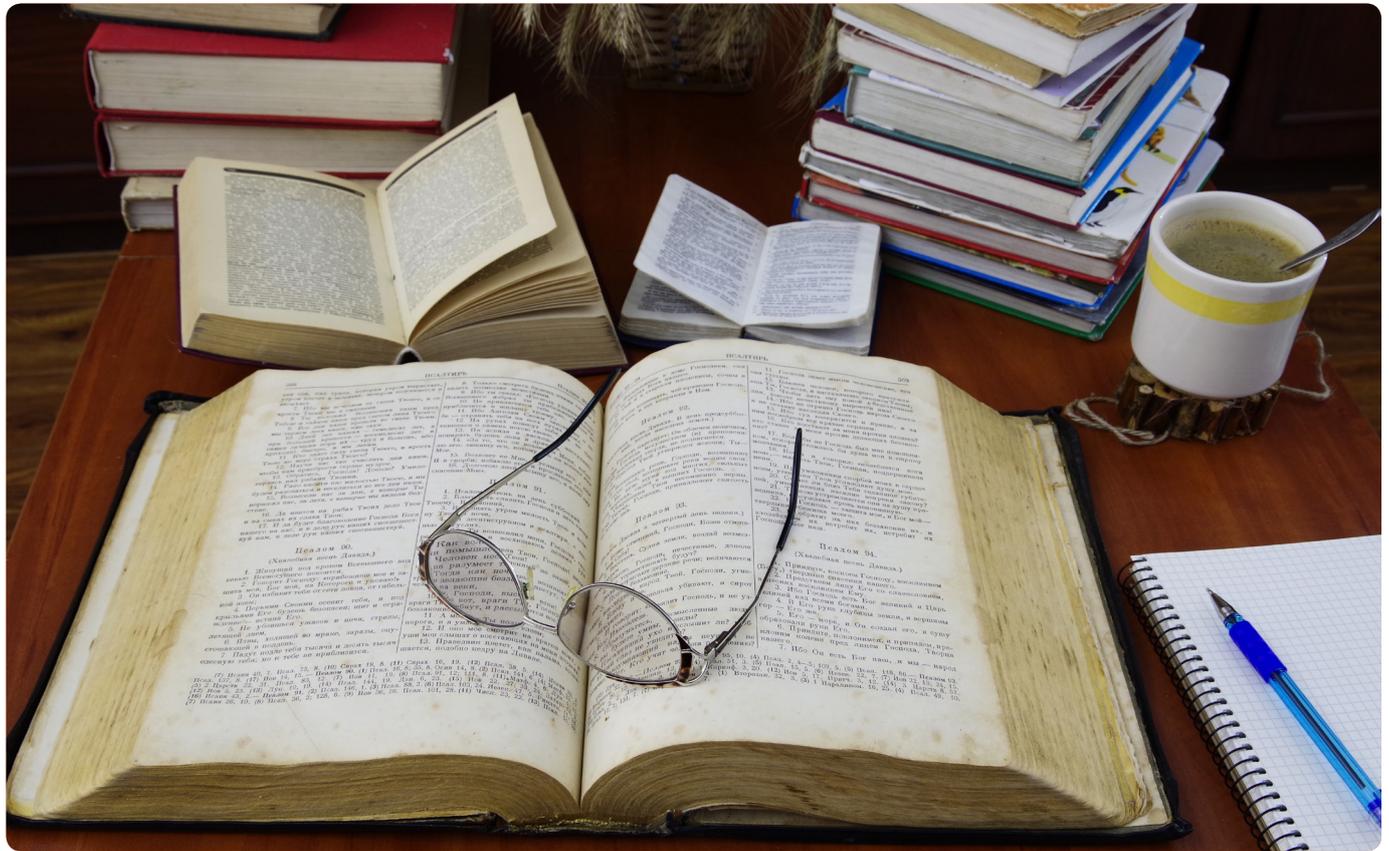
Few things matter more than keeping the gospel central and relying on the power of the Holy Spirit.

I never get tired of learning from [Jack Miller](#). "He believed that understanding the gospel, living by faith, repenting regularly, and praying constantly were the non-negotiables of Christian leadership."

5

To minister well, love well.

Love is central to ministry. Without love, our ministries are nothing (1 Corinthians 13). The pastors who inspire me most are the pastors who love God, dwell deeply in his Word, and regularly communicate their love to their congregations.



6

To love well, do three things: assume the best, tell the truth, and give plenty of safety and time.

All three go against my natural tendency to assume the worst, to be “nice” rather than loving and truthful, and to pressure people.

7

Effective ministry is rooted in theology, not in pragmatics.

This one principle would have saved me so much grief. Ignore all conferences and books that promise the magic bullet. Work out your theology in the context of a real people and a real place. Nothing is more practical than good theology lived out well.

8

Ministry is doing “small, mostly overlooked things, over a long period of time” (Zack Eswine).

[Eugene Peterson](#) said it well: “Most pastoral work involves routines similar to cleaning out the barn, mucking out the stalls, spreading manure pulling weeds. This is not, any of it, bad work in itself, but if we expected to ride a glistening black stallion in daily parades and then return to the barn where a lackey grooms our steed for us, we will be severely disappointed and end up being horribly resentful.”

9

The fundamentals of ministry (preaching, prayer, and discipleship) matter more than the fads.

Few things will hinder ministry more than following fads. Master the basics – preaching, prayer, and discipleship – and repeat.

10

Preaching may go out of style, but it will never lose its importance.

Haddon Robinson said that preaching “is not the only task assigned to a pastor but it is an essential task. It resembles passing for a quarterback in football. He must do more than throw the football; but if he can’t pass he cannot play the position.” Preach in and out of season (2 Timothy 4:1-2)

11

Churches need both gospel doctrine and gospel culture.

“Gospel doctrine - gospel culture = hypocrisy. Gospel culture - gospel doctrine = fragility. Gospel doctrine + gospel culture = power” ([Ray Ortlund](#)).

12

Church revitalization is hard but important.

I’m amazed by these words by Ed Stetzer: “Church revitalization does not happen much, but it does happen sometimes. I have been struck by how infrequently it actually occurs.” It’s hard, but it’s a necessary and important work.

13

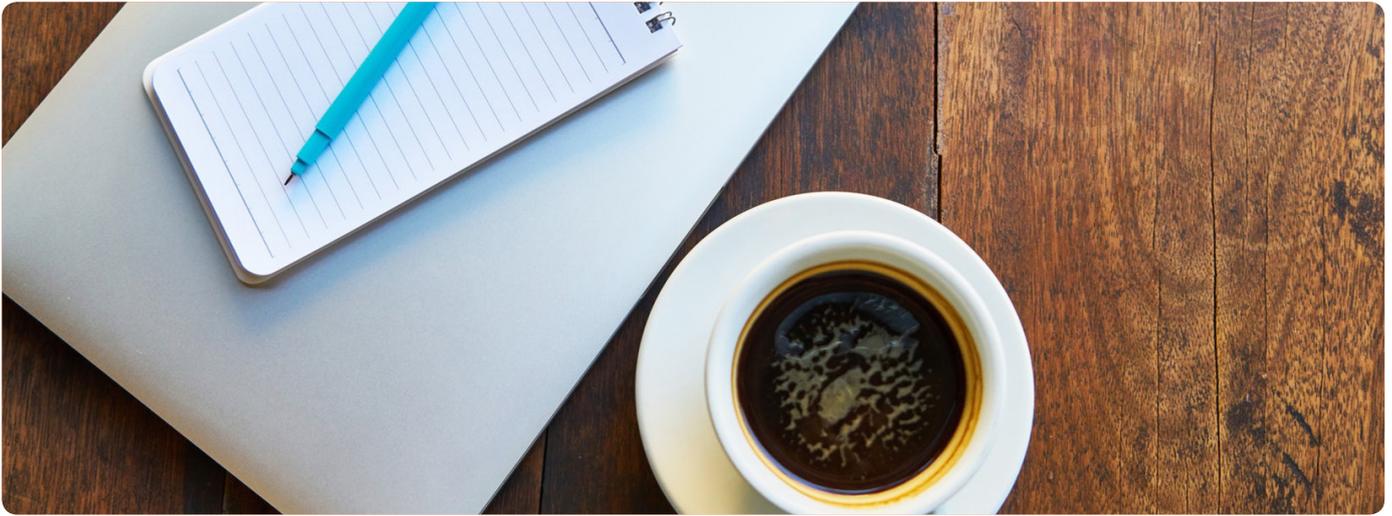
Every church should be involved, at some level, with church planting.

While different churches have different capacities, every church can and should pray for, invest in, and cultivate a vision for church planting.

14

Both traditional and non-traditional (bivocational, low-cost) forms of ministry are needed to accomplish the mission.

As [Stetzer says](#), "We need to open more lanes." These include traditional forms of ministry, as well as bivocational and simple forms of ministry.



15

Post-Christian society is ripe for the gospel.

"What a wonderful open door God has placed before the church of today. A pagan world, weary and sick, often distrusting its own modern gods. A saving gospel strangely entrusted to us unworthy messengers. A divine Book with unused resources of glory and power. Ah, what a marvelous opportunity, my brethren!" ([J. Gresham Machen](#))

16

When conflict happens, move toward it instead of away. Handled rightly, conflict is an opportunity rather than a threat.

One of the most important skills of a pastor is to learn to have [crucial conversations](#).

17

Mentoring others is one of the best uses of our lives.

“What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).

18

What's hardest is often what's most joyful.

I've found this in marriage, parenting, and church planting. To lose our lives is to find them.

19

Ministry is hard.

“To serve is to suffer,” writes Ajith Fernando. When ministry's hard, it's not necessary a sign that you're doing it wrong.

20

Ministry is a privilege.

To suffer is even a privilege (Acts 5:41). To serve God is a privilege we don't deserve (1 Timothy 1:12). Never lose the wonder that we get to do this.

21

Don't focus on hard soil. Focus on the power of the gospel.

It's okay to be realistic about the challenges of ministry. It's wrong to focus on them. Focus instead on Christ and the power of his gospel (Romans 1:16).



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